SUNSET BRIDE

TICKNER EDWARDES

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By TICKNER EDWARDES ::

Author of "The Honey-Star," "Tansy," "The Seventh Wave," etc. :: :: :: ::

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PATERNOSTER ROW

TO MY SON

FLIGHT-LIEUTENANT

EDWARD NORMAN TICKNER EDWARDES, R.A.F.

IN AFFECTION

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Sunset Bride

CHAPTER I

THE SPY HOUSE

I REMEMBER so well that serene, golden August evening long ago, when Linda's letter came.

I was Rector of Fairthorne then, and had been twenty years. The village lies up a green, winding, elm-shadowed lane giving off the great main road between London and the Sussex coast. The fifty-third milestone stands just by Fairthorne turning. From this point, looking northward, you can see the white road rippling away over the bare Downs, and ever mounting till it vanishes afar off through a hilltop notch against the sky. Southward, the road leads to Stavisham market-town three miles off, and thence over the rich alluvial plain to the distant seaside town of Arunport. If you climb to the summit of Fairthorne Down hard by and look away south-westward, you can see the grey cathedral spire of Marshminster glimmering on the misty blue horizon.

In those times we got only one post a day in Fairthorne village. I had taken Evensong, reading the office, as usual on weekdays, to a dim array of empty pews. But instead of going straight back to the house

and my books after the service, as had been my immemorial wont, I turned into the high street, and made off down the lane towards the London road.

I had done the same unusual thing every evening for a week past, and each time with the same result. Standing at the corner by the old, crumbling, lichen-gilded milestone, I had turned my glance on the southern road, and had waited until the familiar expected object came into view—the old postman on his antiquated tricycle with a mail-bag strapped behind. But the letter I wanted had never come. Would it come to-night? I thought, as I stood in the rich sunset light watching the ancient creaking velocipede drawing slowly nigh. And then all at once my heart leaped into my mouth. Old Puddock was waving something over his head as he came. He pulled up, his gnarled, wrinkled, mahogany face suffused with triumph.

"'Tis the right one at laast, Reverend, I'll go bail!" he cried. "I ha' carried it in my hand all the way from Stavisham, so's ye could see it coming. A thick un, foreby. Naun but a woman, ay! and one as thinks gold o'ye, could ha'——"

What more he said I cannot remember, for I never heard. I am not sure that I even thanked him. All I know is that when I had finished reading the letter I was alone on the road, and the sunset glory was deepening to amber dusk. Perhaps I stood five minutes longer, with the letter in my two hands, pondering, and trying to still the joyous threshing of my heart—— I, a weathered, grey-headed man of fifty-seven! And then I folded the half-dozen small daintily-written sheets together, put them carefully back in their envelope, and this again as carefully into my breast-pocket. I think I stood another full five minutes rooted

to the spot—it may have been longer still. At last I turned and set off towards the village at belated lamplighter's pace.

I went straight to the Spy House. Not that the old ivied tenement which stood at the crook of the village street and where Jane and Harriet Lisle had lived since their childhood, actually bore that title. "Spy House" was only the village nickname for it. Jane Lisle, the elder of the two sisters, had been an almost helpless cripple for half her lifetime back, and there she was, always lying, year in and year out, behind the great muslin-curtained bay-window, whence she commanded, herself unseen, an uninterrupted view up and down the street. No one passed by unmarked, and very little happened in Fairthorne but she saw or heard of it, and I through her. She and I had been intimate friends for years. An old bachelor parson, especially one living a great deal amongst his books, depends greatly on the ladies of his parish keeping him posted as to local happenings. But it was not only as village intelligencer that I had so long looked to Jane Lisle. Wellnigh from my first coming to Fairthorne twenty years ago, I had formed the habit of bringing to her all my difficulties and perplexities, material or spiritual, and had never failed of wise and illuminating counsel from her. It was only natural, therefore, that my steps led me straight to the Spy House on that never-to-be-forgotten evening.

Miss Harriet was out, as I knew she would be on library-night. But Miss Jane—the little prim, smiling maid in spotless white cap and apron began superfluously to tell me, when I brushed hastily by her to cross the hall and came to a dead halt, breathing hard, with a trembling hand upraised to knock on the familiar green-baize inner door. Conscious then that the girl was

regarding me curiously, even with a little alarm I pulled myself together. I did not wait for my knock to be answered, for I knew Jane must have seen me coming. I went quietly in, and sat down in my own special chair opposite her couch among the swaying curtains by the window, and stretched out my legs with an assured easy composure that—as I learnt the next moment—deceived no one but myself.

"Well: you have got your letter at last, Frank?"

I could see little of her from my shadowy corner but the kind calm eyes shining in the pain-worn, faded, clever face, and the glint of her knitting needles in the last vestige of ruddy evening light that, such as it was, fell full upon her. I could not help starting.

"What letter? How did you——"

"I didn't, of course. How could I know, as you hadn't told me? But every evening I have seen you careering off down the road. And as old Puddock never stops at the Rectory now with letters, it was a natural conclusion that you were intercepting him. Don't look so absurdly elated, Frank. And please do not pull all the fringe off that antimacassar. Bishops are trying folk to wait for, I know, especially in the matter of letters. But this one has evidently written the right thing at last. Well; it will be a bitter grief to Fairthorne if you are to leave us—— Oh dear!"

For I had got up from my chair in spite of myself, and was striding restlessly to and fro. I hauled up abruptly in front of her.

"Bishop be hanged! He has forgotten all about me ages ago. No, it isn't from the Bishop, Jane. It's it's—— But they've all got to know it sooner or later, and it is better for you to know it first." I stopped. "Jane," I said, and stopped again. "Jane, I—I am going to take a wife."

Never before, I think, in all our long acquaintance had I known Jane Lisle's knitting needles cease their busy flickering play under any stress of mental preoccupation. But they grew stark still now. For a long minute, perhaps, their wielder lay back amongst her cushions perfectly quiet.

"And who?" she asked at length, an odd sort of catch in her voice.

"Oh, it's a very old story, or at least old with a brand new chapter just tacked on the end in these last few months. And it is a long story as well as an old one. And it is a story that cannot be told without the teller having to make a very humiliating confession. Jane, I have been the biggest fool that ever trod the earth."

I could see almost nothing of her now, the light had grown so dim—nothing but the pale oval of her face nestling back amidst the dark cushions. But the knitting had started again.

"Who is it?" she asked once more, this time with a trace of agitation in her tone—certainly nothing of the quiet amusement I had before suspected. "And what sort of fool, Frank?"

"Oh, no one you know—no one about here—hundreds of miles away down in Devon. And the sort of fool——"

"Frank, you are merely bewildering me. You must keep still. No one can talk intelligibly, racing about in the dark like that. Light the candles for me. And sit down and let me hear the whole story from beginning to end—not in this back to front, Alice-through-the-Looking-Glass fashion. You have been a fool, you say? I don't believe it. Prove it to me."

"Very well, then," said I, triumphantly. It was something to get the better of Jane Lisle in an altercation, even though the point was against oneself.

"Very well. Now listen." I got myself squarely in the chair, and held on firmly to its arms, the while she watched me with disconcerting intentness.

"Jane, you have heard me speak of Ledingham?"

"The place where you held your first curacy as a young man?—yes."

"Yes, and the place I never again went near—God forgive me!—in all the years that followed, until—until—— Yes, until I went there only this summer during my holiday. Why did I go? On just what was only an idle impulse, I said to myself at the time—just to have a look at the sleepy old place I had not seen, and scarce even thought about, for half a life-time back. But that was not why, Jane. The real reason was very different. If ever the hand of Providence took blind erring fool by the scruff of the neck at last and—and——"

I stopped to fumble in my pocket.

"No! The only way is to read you her letter—or just those parts of it which—— You'll soon get to understand."

I spread out the sheets of Linda's letter on the table under the yellow candle-glow, and began to read with as steady a voice as I could contrive.

"'To your question, Frank, there is only one answer possible for me, now at this long last, as ever—yes, with all my heart. But have you carefully thought out all that it will mean for us both? You say time has made no difference to you, that if we marry now you will be merely taking up again the thread of your life as it was when you lodged with us here during those three quiet happy years so long ago. But I know you are deceiving yourself, and I cannot do the same. Time *has* made a difference to you—all the difference in the world. That is my great joy.

"'I remember so well the first day I saw you. Mother and I had heard of course that a new curate was coming to Ledingham. But he was the last person in our thoughts on that hot summer's afternoon, when we were at work together in our little garden and one of us chanced to look up and see you coming down the lane. A tall black figure moving along under the sun-dappled shade of the limes, and looking about him for what I never guessed until you actually stopped before the house. And then of course we both realised what the old Vicar had done. He had taken us at our word, and here was the very necessary but mortally dreaded 'single-young-man-lodger' lifting his straw hat to us at our very gate!

"'I took your measure there and then, Frank, and I took it again at the end of those three wonderful years—wonderful at least for me—when you stood at the gate once more, saying good-bye to us, and promising to send us weekly—or was it daily?—bulletins of your progress and achievements in the great far-away world you were going to. And it was the same measure, dear Frank. I did not hoodwink myself. I knew that from your side there was still no other feeling but friendship between us. As you had come into my life, so you went away——'"

Somehow my voice got husky then, and I could not go on reading the next few lines, or what could so easily be read between them. I looked across at Jane Lisle.

"Was there ever such a fool?" I cried to her. "This splendid girl—she and her widowed mother making the bravest secret fight against poverty, and I just taking their service and ready companionship month after month, year after year; and, in my blind idiocy of self-absorption, never once guessing——

And then to go away like that! Worse still, to let my letters soon dwindle down to just a few lines and finally leave off altogether. Worst of all, to get into such a mad state of preoccupation in all this mountain-heap of learned nonsense up which I have been toiling these last twenty years back, that I allowed myself to degenerate into a mere human museum, a dusty, mouldy repository of dead men's ideas, forgetting what I was created for, that I was made of flesh and blood, and that there was such a thing as woman's love in the world, and—and——. Oh, Jane! I can see you know now what I meant when I said that I had been the biggest fool that ever walked the earth. To let all her beautiful sweet youth go by, and her pure ripe womanhood bud and flower and fade! And now at last to go to her, on two sticks, as it were—I an old man, and she almost an old woman! . . ."

I got up hastily and went to the window, to stand there awhile with my burning face flattened against the glass, staring out upon the empty street. The dim half-moon was just lifting over the house-tops, and sending slants of wan golden light across the deserted way. They had lit up at the village store opposite, and the old shopkeeper was lounging in his doorplace with a twist of white apron round his middle, taking a luxurious sniff at the August night. Down the street, the red window-blinds of the "Admington Arms" glimmered hospitably. Over in the churchyard a belated thrush was piping his last sleepy note. It was Jane Lisle's voice that at length broke the silence between us. She spoke with the curious asperity that always seized her when deeply moved.

"Yes, I see. Of course you have been a fool. And she? What else was possible for her?—for any decent-minded woman, for any woman with a scrap of pride? You richly deserve to have lost her for ever. It is an

incredible piece of luck for you—as things have turned out. Well, well, Frank, the past is past, and cannot be altered now. And at any rate, the books are written and well written. You have made your name as a pedagogue. Now you are to live the life of a man. Do you want me to hear more of the letter?"

I went back to the table, and looked over the sheets.

"The rest," said I, "is nearly all about herself. Mrs. Walton—that was her mother, you know—died soon after I left Ledingham, and her small annuity died with her. Linda had a rough time of it for a while, I think, but when I saw her in the summer, I couldn't get her to say much about that. Anyhow, the old Vicar stood by her like the brick he was and eventually got her the post of mistress to the Infant School there. And that is what she has been doing ever since. Goodness!—how long is it?—near upon thirty years! But listen to what she says——"

"'And now look at it from my side, Frank. You must not think that all these long years of silence between us have been idle years, or unhappy years for me. I have really been a very busy and a fairly happy woman most of the time. My work for the children has always been hard, and the long hours indoors very often trying to one of my nature; and I was not specially well equipped for teaching. But I know I have done the work well, for I soon grew to love it and so threw my whole heart into it. There are scores of grown-up men and women now in this little town who were once tiny tots in my school, and I do not think I have ever lost touch with a scholar after they left me, but have kept the friendship of all, and have been able to help most of them in numberless little ways in their after-lives. Far from being lonely and dissatisfied here in Ledingham, as you seem to think, I

have led, and still lead, a full and happy and busy life in the midst of friends.

"'Now, it is not easy for me to give all this up, Frank. The truth is, it is very hard indeed. And yet, at a word from you, as you see, I am going to do it, and that gladly—cut myself adrift from all that has made life worth living for me through these long years, and go off to a perfectly new existence in a new county, among complete strangers, to join my life with the life of one whom I dearly love and always have loved, but whom I really know only as I remember him so many years back—a sort of dreamy, impulsive, overgrown schoolboy, plastered over with academical theology which no more concealed his true inwardness than his black parson's clothes concealed his true human innocent delight and never-ceasing marvel at being privileged to inhabit such a wonderful and beautiful world.

"'You will laugh at this old-time picture of yourself, but you will probably recognise it as a fairly good likeness, all the same. Whether it bears any resemblance to the Rev. Francis Streatley Benison of latter days, or whether you have changed into another being altogether, time alone can prove to me. But I am not afraid; and——'"

"Why, as to that," interrupted Jane Lisle, knitting furiously, "your most exasperating fault, Frank, as I have always told you, is that you have never grown up at all, as the actual, sinful, workaday world understands growing up. A clever woman like that will not be afraid of anything, of course, but——" She stopped. She hesitated a little. "Frank," she went on suddenly, "what have you told her about Fairthorne, and your life here, and the kind of people we are, and all that? Naturally she would be anxious

to know what she would have to face, as the Rector's wife."

"Well," said I, hesitating in my turn, "of course I did not attempt to paint a more rosy picture of the place than the facts warranted. I told her plainly that she would find life here very quiet, far removed from the noise and bustle of the world—not at all like Ledingham as it is now, you know. It has turned into quite a bustling good-sized country-town since I first knew it. Oh, I gave her pretty clearly to understand how things went with us here. But I told her that the village was a little gem of beauty set in the heart of lovely country, and the people just simple, contented, unemotional Sussex village-folk who loved nothing better than to be let alone to live their daily lives as they chose, and in return left their anchorite parson to follow his own studious bent undisturbed. So that there will be nothing in the world for her to do but——"

"I thought so!" interrupted Jane Lisle. For half a minute her knitting-needles clinked aggressively in the silence, while I looked at her wondering what was coming next. "I thought so! I guessed it the moment you began to read her first word. The village a kind of Sleepy Hollow and Utopia rolled into one! And the people only a lot of happy, overfed, soulless simpletons living like canaries in a cage! And for her—the Rector's wife, if you please!—nothing in the world to do all day long, like our fine Primrose Dame and her satellite up in the big house yonder! A pretty picture, truly! Well, Frank, if that is what you have told her, I can see one thing quite plainly. You are bringing this woman here under false pretences."

"What!"

"Yes: false pretences. Why didn't you tell her

the real truth while you were about it? Is that the sort of picture likely to draw a woman away from what she calls 'a full and happy and busy life'?"

"But what do you mean, Jane?" said I, more than a little puzzled at this outburst, for outburst it was.

She regarded me with a sort of affectionate, patient scorn.

"What do I mean? Why, just this. All you have repeated to me falls miserably, outrageously short of the facts about the place and its parson, and you must know it very well. Fairthorne is beautiful and green and quiet enough. But it is no Utopia, no stagnant immaculate fool's paradise, and thank God for that. It is just an ordinary human place full of ordinary human people, no better and no worse than others. That is to say, the village is the same queer mixture of good and bad, happy and unhappy, well-to-do or scraping-along-somehow or desperately poor—common working men and women who sin and suffer, and make merry and quarrel, and marry and die, just like the people in hundreds of other villages. Ah! but with this great difference. They have got a parish priest who loves them one and all, and spends his whole life and means serving them. Anchorite parson, indeed! Frank, Frank! how little you know yourself, and the place you have made for yourself here in the heart of every man and woman and child! But if you do not know it, I promise you, for one, it shall not be long before she——"

It was my turn to laugh then.

"And is this your false pretences, Jane?" I asked, considerably relieved. "Time enough to go into all that when we are married and settled down, and——"

"Tell me," she said, pointing a glittering steel needle

straight at me like a dagger, but with the same kind look in her eyes, withal in the same strident, provocative tone. "Does she know how you have lived these twenty years back?—the miserable stipend, and the books on liturgiology bringing you in any amount of compliments from all the learned dry-as-dusts in the country but scarcely enough hard cash to pay for the upkeep of the church mice? And does she know that you are continually giving away almost the very coat off your back, and that if the Odlings did not make the Rectory bees and poultry and the rest bring in a little, you might soon all three be starving? Does she, or does she not?"

Quick light footsteps that we both knew sounded now in the quiet street. I rose to go.

"Of course," said I, "I told her in my last letter all this, and more. And you can see how little it affects her. Linda!—she is tough as well as true as steel!"

We heard the house-door fling open. A tremendous thumping, scraping sound followed—Miss Harriet Lisle, back from her weekly distribution of books at the village library, cleaning her shoes upon the mat. I reached hastily for my hat.

"And when," asked Jane Lisle, "are you to bring home your—what shall we call her?—your Sunset Bride?"

"Oh, in about a month from now," said I, moving off. "There is no reason for delay. Linda and I—we are both quite alone in the world, you know."

Jane Lisle called me back at the door.

"I may tell Harriet, may I?—and the rest? Of course you will not wish it kept a secret."

Before I could answer, a voice sounded briskly under my elbow.

"The Rector with a secret from me? I should think not, indeed! Have they made him a Prebendary, or what is it?"

She stood in the doorway slowly jerking off her white cotton gloves finger by finger, her big round spectacles flashing affectionate sharp inquiry at each of us in turn. A queer little thick-set, sturdy figure in white muslin dabbed all over with sky-blue roses. Jane Lisle looked at me, and I nodded.

"Frank is going to marry."

At the word, Harriet's glossy grey ringlets moved as though struck by a sudden flaw of wind. A moment's stupefaction of silence fell upon her. And then—

"Who is it?" she cried, with almost the same curious agitation as her sister had shown. "Not—not——"

"No one in Fairthorne—some old friend of his down in Devonshire—no one we know at all."

Harriet Lisle looked blankly at Jane. And then she threw up her hands.

"Oh! whatever will Valerie Thrapp say when she comes home!" she burst forth, and stopped at once, pierced by her sister's eye.

CHAPTER II

THE HOME-COMING

But still more vividly I remember that other evening, later by a month or more, when my old gardener, groom and general factotum, William Odling, who had met us with the pony-chaise at Stavisham railway-station, turned into Fairthorne lane from the dusty high-road, and there brought the ancient equipage to an unexpected halt. Suddenly I felt Linda's two hands tighten themselves upon my arm. Her laugh rang out clear and low.

"Look!" she cried, her own glance travelling intently up the lane, and I looked with all my wondering eyes.

A hundred yards or so up the tunnel of sun-barred greenery, a solid phalanx of people blocked the way. Flags fluttered in the breeze. I caught a glint of polished metal here and there in the forefront of the throng. Linda's laugh rang out again. But as I turned to her, I saw her dancing eyes fill.

"And this is what you call just slipping home quietly before anyone knew we were coming?" she began, when a roar of welcoming voices seemed to make the earth quake about us. The band—it was easily recognisable as the brass band from Ashbury, the next

village over the hill—started a terrific pounding melody. A moment later the little chaise was surrounded by a mob of faces long familiar to me, beaming jollity and goodwill, and a score of rough hands that I had often grasped before were stretched to us from all sides. In a trice the obese old pony was taken from the shafts, and soon we were journeying on again towards the village, the entire manpower of Fairthorne hauling at the two ropes that had been hitched to the chaise.

"It can't be helped!" I shouted in Linda's ear, making myself heard with difficulty above the din of voices from our joyful escort. "William must have betrayed us. I thought he had some secret on his mind when I first caught sight of him. The only thing is to let them have their way, and hold on tight, and——"

A more violent lurch of the vehicle than any hitherto, threw us together at that moment like a pair of rooks in their nest on a stormy night. We attempted no more converse until the village was reached, and there fresh surprises awaited us. Strings of gaily coloured bunting stretched across the high-street everywhere from house to house. The great St. George's Cross flag flew from the church-tower, and the bells clanged out lustily as our advent was observed. In the Square, the school-children clad in their Sunday best were drawn up in formal array. At every open door and window as we passed, happy faces and voices greeted us. The Ashbury band kept up its pounding, blaring music in the rear. It seemed an age before the Rectory hove into view. But at last we were safely inside its gates. Linda and I stood together at the house-door waving our thanks and goodbyes until the last of the escort had made ceremonial

exit, and the gates were closed again. I led Linda into the cool, quiet, orderly house, and through into the drawing-room looking out upon the glowing garden behind. Mrs. Odling, who had followed hard upon our heels, impelled Linda into one of the great arm-chairs newly covered with glossy pink-rosetted chintz, and, drawing off a little, surveyed her with a deferential yet gravely critical eye.

Truth to tell, we had now arrived at a moment which I had long had apprehensively in mind. The fact was Mrs. Odling, as housekeeper at Fairthorne Rectory, was accustomed to wield absolutely despotic powers over all living creatures and inanimate objects about her. As two men busily and deeply absorbed in our respective spheres of life, William Odling and I had always been well content to concede her that position. With us, the arrangement had worked admirably, if at times a trifle stormily. But how would it do under the coming new order of things ?

I looked at the two women in turn. Mrs. Odling in her silver-grey alpaca gown ; very big, portly, upright ; a face ruddy-cheeked and strong of feature, with a pair of combative brown eyes set deep under a broad, fleshy forehead, this in turn surmounted by a mop of grizzled hair confined within an old-fashioned net of black chenille. As she looked at Linda beaming cool, collected amiability from the flowery depths of the great arm-chair, the big cameo brooch upon Mrs. Odling's ample bosom rose and fell with, as I thought, rather disturbing augury for the peace of times to come.

Linda sat quite still under this scrutiny. As I regarded her then, I remember that the same tumult of feeling as had seized upon me when I first saw her in the early part of that summer after so many years,

fled across my heart. It was not premonition of ill-health in her—far from it, I was fully persuaded then as now. Though the woman before me was manifestly no longer young, with her greying hair, and form undeniably slight and frail, yet the lines of her slender figure were full of womanly grace, and she carried herself superbly—even as she lay back in the chair, there was that in her moulding and the poise of her upturned face that sent the old thrill quivering through me to my finger-tips—an odd sort of impulse, well-nigh incontrollable, to drop on one knee to her as to a queen.

But, now as then, the same thing happened to me. Lifting my glance from its worship of her body, I forgot all else in the wonder of her face and eyes—the sweet, intense, imperious face whose pallor was not whiteness but a sort of milk-white, unearthly purity, and the grey-blue eyes that were more unearthly still, yet had a fire in their blue depths like the specks of fiery colour in lapis-lazuli. A fear came suddenly knocking at my heart. Though Mrs. Odling had made herself, through sheer merit and capability, the veritable key-stone of all our fortunes at Fairthorne Rectory, yet if time should breed any sort of variance between her and its new mistress——

My uncomfortable ruminations were brought to a sudden happy end. To my inexpressible relief and delight, I beheld the bulky grey-gowned figure start forward with outstretched arms, and the slender form in the chair spring up simultaneously to meet it. The two women closed in a warm embrace.

"Ye'll do, dearie! ye'll do, fine as fine!" I heard Mrs. Odling's deep smothered chuckle contending with Linda's laugh, low and clear as a bell. And then the older woman drew off stiffly, recollecting herself. "Begging your pardon, ma'am. Such a long journey,

and me forgetting as ye must be tired, ay, and hungry, both o' ye. And supper spilin' in the kitchen. Willim? —a'd never think o' pulling a jint out o' the oven though 'twas burning to cinders and the place full o' smoke. But 'twill be all on table directly-minute!"

With that she flung round and charged out of the room, her skirts making a furious rustle as she went.

After supper Linda and I went out into the verandah and sat there side by side looking out through the drooping bines of virginia-creeper at the star-gemmed blue of the September night. Linda was very quiet for a while, and the last thing I wanted to do just then was to talk—to bring the clumsy makeshift of words into that precious hour, when I felt some infinitely finer, truer medium was carrying to and fro between us every thought of our two hearts. Besides, I was far from sure that I could trust myself just then to put words together in any sequence or coherence. Though after the quiet little wedding in the ancient church of Ledingham, Linda and I had been wandering about the Devon moors for weeks together, it was not till I beheld her as mistress of the old house which had been my own home for so long, that I fully realised what great good thing had come to pass in my life.

The night was warm as midsummer. Linda lay in the long cane deck-chair, her face turned up to the stars, one white arm, slender but of an almost girlish comeliness, thrown back upon the cushions above her head. I sat close by, yet a little in the rear, so that I could keep stealthy eyes upon her in that dim restoring light, a trick I had already grown fond of. It was not that I blenched in any way at the fact of her years, but a few short of the number of mine, nor sought to nourish any foolish fiction of youth about her. I loved her just as dearly under the searching light of the full

midday sun that cut the lines in her high forehead deeper than they really were, gave to the throat beneath her dainty dinted chin a transverse cleft or two more than time had yet achieved, picked out silver bands deep in her wealth of soft brown hair that were intended as yet to be seen of men no more than sunken ingots at the bottom of the Atlantic.

It was that I needed sorely some sort of bridge, rocket-line, tight-rope, call it what you will, to take me at a bearable rate over that chasm of half a lifetime which had been such a tragedy for her soul and mine. I frankly own to a terror of heart when I was brought up against the two visions ruthlessly side by side: Linda the blooming girl of seventeen, and Linda the woman of nearly fifty. Mere human fortitude, or at least the male version of it, could not stand up against the grief thus always and instantly engendered. Unless I was to be ever inwardly blubbering like a schoolboy over the past, I must find some means of chamfering off the sharp edges of this rending thing, and I found it mercifully in these stolen half-glimpses at Linda that revealed her to me neither as girl nor woman well on in years, but in bearable graduated stages of that long road of time which my folly had condemned us both to tread in solitude.

And so I sat there, puffing at my pipe, and feeding sidelong greedy eyes on her starlit beauty, until suddenly she broke from her dreams and, turning, met my gaze point-blank. Her two eyes shone in the darkness brighter than any stars. The white arm came over the side of the chair, and the long shapely hand was lowered into mine like a bird homing to its nest.

"Frank," she said, "we are still honeymooning, we old folk, you and I; and so let it be, just to the end of this last glorious day But from to-morrow—

to-morrow—well! you shall see! Oh, I feel as if my life were only just beginning! And there is such a mountain-heap of new things to learn, and new things to be done, and—Frank, couldn't we begin to talk about it all now? I know we agreed not to spoil the beautiful time away in Devon by plotting and planning for the future. I know it was I as much as you who wanted to forget all about the parish until we got home. But we are home now, aren't we? And could there be a better time than just this when we are quiet and alone, for you to tell me a little of all you have promised to tell me about the place and the people? I am longing so to make a start with all that is waiting for me to do."

I was silent an uneasy moment or two. And then—

"No!" said I, with decision, for I saw the time had now come when I must take firm ground with her if my own long-cherished and very different schemes for our joint future were to maintain the upper hand. "Linda—no. Not to-night! never dear, if talk about parish affairs between you and me is merely to help you to heap work on your own shoulders, when I have thoroughly made up my mind long ago that you shall do nothing of the sort. You have done enough work already in the world for one life; and I want you now to forget that there is such a word in the language. Of course, in time, you will get to know everybody here and all about them, and your influence cannot help but become a great force in all their lives. But I will not have you seek it. My great hope is that you may have leisure now, and peace and quiet—years of it on end, oceans of it!—all that you have missed during this—this—ghastly gulf of time when we have both been getting grey, and—and—— Oh, my dear, my dear! you know what I mean, though I am saying it so badly. All these

years you have been wearing yourself out with work, body and soul. Do you think I have got you out of that confounded gaol of a school at last, only to see you plunge again here into just such another miserable moil ? "

She heard me through to the end, her bright eyes shining under the pale night straight into mine.

" Well," said she, as I stopped, " it has come sooner than I expected."

" Dearie, what has come ? "

" Why, our first quarrel, Frank. That is, at least, if you really mean what you say. But you cannot possibly think I could settle down to an idle life, just looking on at things, while you——"

" But there will be really almost nothing for you to do, Linda, except look after your own house here. Now, do listen to reason. For years past I have had all the church and social work of the parish systematically parcelled out between the men and women helpers. And they are a splendid lot, as you will soon find. It all goes like clockwork. There are the two churchwardens, Sir Andrew Admington and old Marks the farmer—they see to the business side of things : while Lady Admington and the Lisle sisters look after the social side between them, the one taking the gentle and the others the simple folk. Those are my Big Five, the main wheels in my well-oiled parish machine. But then there are all sorts of little wheels diligently spinning within the big ones,—the people who run the Sunday School, and Bible-classes and men's and women's and children's clubs, and sewing-meetings, and all the rest. As for me, I just sit in the middle of it all like a spider in its web, keeping an eye on things generally and putting in a finger now and then when I think something is going wrong, or too fast, or too

slow. But there is really astonishingly little to do, even for one. And with two of us now——! Why, I do not even need to see to my own sacristan work—looking after the altar flower-vases and communion-vessels, and so on—that has been done for me admirably for long years. Valerie Thrapp——"

I stopped to think as the name came into my head, the first time for many weeks.

"But I forgot to tell you, Linda. The people up at the big house have been away from Fairthorne for a long time, ever since Easter in fact, travelling on the Continent for Sir Andrew's health. I do not even know whether they are back yet, though they were due weeks ago. I must ask Mrs. Odling."

"She has already told me," said Linda. "They got back this afternoon: only a few hours before our own arrival." Linda sat quiet a moment. "But what has that to do with Valerie Thrapp?" she asked.

"Oh, Valerie? Why, she is Lady Admington's companion, secretary, or something—writes all her speeches for her, they say, manages the whole house and estate for Sir Andrew, and makes herself generally indispensable to both of them. A very clever young woman; and she need be, with what they put upon her. But I am only telling you all this just to bear out what I first said. Linda, I have got the bit well between my teeth on this point, I can assure you, and you must give way to me, dear, and talk no more about mountain-heaps of new things to learn and do. There is a great life coming for us both, please God, if only He will help me to realise all that I have planned. A great life—yes, and a great work. You shall not be idle, you shall have plenty to do, if lack of that be the only cause of quarrel between us. For is it not work, and real hard work too, to make a human soul grow, and become what

its Maker intended it to become in this world? Have we not both done enough of the rough hacking and hewing in all these years we have lived apart and alone? Have we not the right now to lay aside the heavy tools, leaving them to the younger folk; and take up the fine ones quietly together—get out of the din of the whirlwind so that we may have a chance of hearing the Still Small Voice?"

Linda was sitting up now, looking intently at me, her chin in her one hand, the while the fingers of the other drummed steadily on the arm of her chair. The drumming went on some little time after I had finished.

"Frank," said she at last, "I can see one thing pretty plainly—you are still a far better hand at deceiving yourself than deceiving other people. I know something about these parish machines, and know very well they need a great deal more thought and energy to keep running than you would have me believe. And that is where I know I can help you. What you have needed all these years is someone very near to you, someone you could trust, who could take all that burden off your shoulders and leave you free for this other work of yours that I have always loved so. Yes, though you never knew it, of course, I used to watch for your books to be published, and read every word as soon as they came out, marking the passages carefully that most appealed to me, and——"

"Linda! Is that really true? You read all that dry-as-dust twaddle! Why, the last thing in the world I——"

She stopped me with indignation.

"Twaddle?—no! You always tried to sift the true from the false, the real from the unreal; what was built on the rock from what was built on the sand. And though I could not understand the half of it——"

"Small wonder for that, my dear! For it was the same with myself most of the time—just raking about among dead leaves, and only bringing more dead leaves to light. Oh, what a bat's life I have led, when I could have been out in God's sunshine all the time! But there shall be no more of it, dearie!—no more grubbing among dead things with the dead. Wait till you hear about all the new schemes——"

We kept on interrupting each other.

"I know, I know!" she cried. "All that old church history about copes and chasubles and things—it was beautiful to learn how those ancient fathers really sought to express their worship in silk and gold, and upheld the right forms of words even to burning at the stake for them. But that part of your—our—life's work is finished, Frank, I can well see, and have long foreseen. Now there is something beyond, something greater perhaps——"

In that moment there came to me as though plainly written above on the star-gemmed sky, a vision, a revelation, of a new-old purpose for our united lives, such as had never yet dawned upon me, though I knew then it had been in the Eternal Mind all the time.

"Linda!"

My voice sounded strange even to my own ears. I saw her start.

"Yes, yes, Frank dear!"—her breath coming hard and quick.

I reached for her in the silvery, murmurous darkness, and drew her head down tenderly upon my breast. The smell of her hair, just like sweet briar on an April morning, is strong about me now while I write these words as it was at that deathless moment.

"Linda," said I, "I have learnt a new lesson—

you have taught it to me, dear, by the story of your lifelong, unregarded love. Shame on me, dearest wife —yet hope dawning bright on me too. I can see now at last with clear eyes, and I can see what a wretched mistake and failure have been my whole past life and work. If I could thereby recall the wasted time and have it again for use, I would call in every printed word of mine and burn all to ashes. But though that cannot be, this thing is clear to me at last. Oh, how I have failed the Good Shepherd! Into my hands all those long years ago He gave these His sheep—these four hundred odd souls in little Fairthorne—and see how I have betrayed the trust! Linda, I will never write another word, nor read another book, save one—but that one always. We will read it together and act upon it: frame our lives and work upon it, and——"

"Yes, and that means, dear Frank, that I must hel'p you drive the machine. You cannot leave me out of it, now this new vision has come to you—to us both. And to-morrow—to-morrow the new life shall begin!

CHAPTER III

A VISIT OF STATE

THE two most notable features of Fairthorne village were its all-mantling verdure and its absence of straight lines, whether in the contour of its ancient houses or the course of its public ways. Neither in the crooked high street nor in any of the narrow winding lanes forming a network on each side of the main thoroughfare, could you look ahead for more than a few yards from any given point.

And in the summer-time the whole village was smothered in green leaves. Trees old and gnarled yet still vigorous in their age, stood at every corner, or peered over the housetops from the gardens behind. A glimpse of grey stone wall or shingled tower or shining gilt weathercock just lifting above the foliage was all you could see of the church from any prospect. Bordering the Square was a dense barricade of limes cut away beneath to let the light in at the low shop-windows; that is to say, so much of the daylight as could penetrate the ancient bullseye panes.

The Rectory itself was perhaps more deeply embowered than all. Wrapped to the chimney-tops in ivy and wistaria and virginia-creeper, its old garden ringed about with every sort of blossoming shrub and tree, the rambling old house was so little conspicuous

to the passer-by that, but for the gilt legend on its gates denoting that here was the Rectory, no one would have suspected its presence, in summer-time at least. Only towards the south had I held in check my natural reluctance for tree-lopping, and kept the view gloriously open to the far horizon where the blue misty huddle of Arunport roof-tops was just visible, and, beyond it, the ships sailing upon the sea.

On the afternoon of the day following our return to Fairthorne, Linda and I were down in the orchard pacing to and fro together to a merry tune of robins hiding overhead in the sun-fretted green, when we beheld Mrs. Odling coming towards us with a grave and troubled visage.

"The whole bilin'!" she said, as soon as she was near enough for the loudest of stage-whispers to reach us. "My lady, and him, and—and her, *and* the dogs. They're all in the drawing-room. But ye needn't be at home unless you likes. I tould 'em as I believed you was hout, but I'd go and see."

I looked to Linda for a backing-up in deception. But she shook her head.

"We said we would begin to-day, didn't we?" she said, with a comical half-sigh. "And this is as good a start as any. Well, come along and get it over, dear."

Our first view on opening the drawing-room door was of the magnificent black corded-silk presence of Lady Admington throned bolt upright in the biggest of the chintz-covered armchairs, and by her side Sir Andrew with admirably concealed effort constraining five dainty small dogs of various breeds in leash. Valerie Thrapp stood in the window blocking out three parts of the light, as she easily could do. On our entry, Lady Admington rose in a series of slow, stately

convolutions, her black ostrich plume finally all but sweeping the ceiling. She held out both hands to Linda.

" My dear! A hearty welcome to Fairthorne, first. And then a thousand apologies. The dogs, you know! They would come. Your husband was always glad to see them. And I had not the heart to turn them back after they had followed the carriage all the way to the park-gates. How do you do, Rector?"

And " How are you, Benison?" from Sir Andrew, just succeeding in giving each of us a hand for a moment in the midst of his quiet struggles with the pack. Valerie Thrapp came forward, greeted us both, returned without a word said to her place in the window. Lady Admington stormed on elegantly, her eyeglasses on their long rod of tortoiseshell poised in front of her great rosy roman nose. Indeed her whole vast face was of the same even warmth of hue. Hair pure silvery white, very ample, carried back in a curving billow from the narrow high forehead underneath the immense black mushroom hat. Altogether a patrician figure, if a trifle too flamboyant.

" And another thing, my dear Mrs. Benison—*Mrs. Benison*: nonsense! What is your Christian name, my dear? Lin—what? I couldn't quite catch—Oh, Linda! I may call you by that, may I not? We shall be such near neighbours, and we are going to be such close friends, I know. I am sure I shall be calling you Linda in a month's time, so why not now? Linda, it shall be then, right away."

With a laugh, she put out her prodigious arms and folded us both in. I could see Linda, though astonished as well she might be, was not displeased. And that was a load off my mind, for Lady Admington was undeniably the heaviest wheel in the machine.

"Another thing, my dear. Of course we ought to have left you in peace for three or four days at least. I do hope everybody else will. But you see to-morrow is Saturday, and Valerie there was in such a desperate fidget and fume to know whether you still wished her to go on with——"

"Oh, no, Lady Admington, not quite so bad as that!"

It was the first word Valerie Thrapp had spoken since our entry. She came forward now into the circle with that slow action of limb and slight roll in her gait that had always seemed to me the very expression of the physical power that was her dominant attribute. Enormously big and strong she looked as she pulled up in our midst: yet strangely careworn, I thought, and somehow different from her old self A smile played over her square, sunburnt, resolute face. Her thin red lips flashed apart as the smile changed to a laugh.

"Hardly so bad as that, Rector. Only I thought that now Mrs. Benison was here, she would naturally like to do the flowers herself, and as to-morrow is the day for it, I—I——"

She spoke to me, but was looking at Linda. And then suddenly her voice had faltered, her colour changed. A grey cast came over it. She put her hand to her head. The next moment she had turned back unsteadily to her old place in the window, and stood there holding on to the frame, her face averted from us all.

"Don't bother about me—I shall be all right in a minute——" the words came back to us low and dry and tremulous over her heaving shoulder.

"Why, Valerie, my dear! What is the matter?"

In impetuous concern, Lady Admington was

following to the window. But before she had taken two steps, Valerie Thrapp had flung round and was back again in our astonished midst.

"I am so sorry, Mrs. Benison. It is the heat, I think. That and the rough Channel crossing yesterday. But I am all right now. Thank you ever so much."

Linda had pulled her down into a chair, and set to chafing her hands. Lady Admington had produced smelling-salts. I had wrenched a Chinese fan from its nail on the wall, and was tendering the absurd thing as my share in restorative ministrations. Sir Andrew, the while he stared in anxious amazement at Valerie Thrapp, did wonders in stifling sundry yelps and scufflings among his four-footed charges. We were all relieved presently to see Valerie's colour creep back into her blanched cheeks and lips. It was wonderful how she fought and overcame the affection that had seized her—laughed it down—warmly returned the pressure of Linda's hand.

"How very stupid of me!" she cried. "But let us forget it. I am as well as ever now. What was it I was saying? Oh, the altar flower-vases! Of course, Mrs. Benison——"

"Of course," broke in Linda, still holding the brown hand fast in her own white slender ones, "of course my great wish can only be that you should go on doing exactly as you always have done in this and everything else. My husband has told me all about the way you have helped him, and I am sure he will back me up in this. Is it not so, Frank?"

Before I could say a word, Lady Admington stood in, all genial sail set.

"Well then, that's all settled and done with. Brooks shall bring the flowers down for Valerie as usual

to-morrow. And oh, Rector, I do hope you will have a fine sermon, one of your very best, for us on Sunday morning. We shall have such a large party—goodness knows how many: Lord and Lady Harbury, and Sir Banks Richards and his two nieces, and the 'Old Honourable' as we call her, old Mrs. Lewcroft, and all the Powell-Graemes, and that Scotch painter-man we met in Cairo—what did he call himself, Andrew?"

"Garth—Malcolm Garth. But he is not a painter, my dear—he's a kind of sculptor, or at least glorified stonemason. Very clever, they tell me. Peculiar, though. Hates railways. Walking down to Fairthorne, if you can believe it—all the way from London, with a bag full of chisels and mallets on his back, I suppose. Expected in to-night. But you'll all like him, especially the Rector here. Great on church-windows—stone-tracery and that. And gargoyles and pinnacles, and things. Of course you've heard of the man, Benison? Goes all over the country at his work."

Sir Andrew Admington, standing on the hearthrug with the five restless little dogs for ever winding and unwinding their leather cords about his legs, looked the very picture of affable unconcern as he gave us these details of his new travel acquaintance in that low, clear cultivated voice of his. He was sixty, and looked it to the full. A tall figure, lean and slightly bent, with a fagged, furrowed, darkly handsome face, iron-grey hair much receded at the temples, and eyes that watched rather than saw.

Here Linda expressed a desire to know something more of the Admington peregrinations abroad, and Lady Sophie, nothing loth, commenced what promised, or rather threatened, to be an over-lengthy narrative. I took the opportunity of signing to Sir Andrew, and

we passed through the French window and out into the garden.

"You can let them free now," said I; "they will do no harm here."

The five little dogs—the two Aberdeens, and the Pekinese, and the white-and-tan Scotch collie, and the tiny Jack Russell—raced off together into the shrubberies. Sir Andrew and I stood a moment watching their gambols in silence.

"Mind you," said he, at length, "I don't believe the girl is really well, and hasn't been for a long time. We think she got bad news or something about two months ago. Anyhow she has never been her old self since. Always so keen and busy and happy. But now! Not the slightest interest in anything. Hated every place we went to. Hated all the people we met. Hated coming home most of all. Can't make it out at all; can you?"

His words set me pondering. I answered his question with another.

"What made you invite Malcolm Garth to stay at Fairthorne Manor?" I asked.

Sir Andrew spread out his two hands perplexedly.

"There again!" said he. "How were we to know we were doing wrong? The two were thick enough together in Egypt, exploring those old tombs and things. And Sophie thought it was the very thing she—— But, heavens and earth! when we told her what we had done!"

We had strolled on to the far end of the garden. As we turned, voices sounded from the house, and we saw the three emerging—Lady Admington taking the aria in the cantata of polite felicitation usual among women meeting each other for the first time The visit was drawing to its close evidently, and I had not yet

touched on the matter for which I had drawn Sir Andrew apart. I put a hand on his shoulder as we paced on.

"And you yourself—how have things fared with you?"

He answered me in the same low tone, yet with a sudden nervous heat and hurry, and a dark flush on his averted face.

"Not a drop! Never one single drop all the time! I swear it! But—but I have been wanting to get home—lately. The last day or two I—I——"

"Don't worry, dear friend. Here you are, safe and sound; and here am I by your side to help you. But give me your hand in the old way."

We had stopped under a little rustic tunnel of roses, where we were momentarily screened from the view of the advancing trio. I faced him, and made him face me, which he did with ominous reluctance.

"Now Andrew Admington! It is your parish priest using the authority vested in him by his calling with you, a dutiful son of the Church. You know your danger, and you know the only power that can aid you in it. As your priest, I call upon you solemnly to renew your promise. Your hand on it, my son, in the old true way."

He stood a moment irresolute, silent, shaking from head to foot. The flush deepened on his face, and as I looked I saw bright beads start out upon it. At last, with something very like a cry of pain, he thrust his trembling hand in mine.

"Yes, yes! By God's help and yours, father! I promise, I promise! But you will come at once if—if——"

"Any hour of the day or night. You know I will."

As presently Linda and I were walking down to the

gate with our visitors, to see them comfortably ensconced in the wide, old-fashioned carriage, I managed for an instant to get Lady Admington to myself.

"Have everything locked up and out of sight directly you get back," I warned her under my breath.

"Are you afraid then——"

"I am not sure. Not yet, I think. But we ought to be prepared. And send for me on the slightest sign."

CHAPTER IV

TROUBLED WATERS

SUNDAY—memorable as Linda's first Sunday in Fairthorne—had come and gone; and she and I were sitting at breakfast together in the little sunny parlour on the ensuing Monday morning debating plans for the day.

One thing I was firmly resolved upon, and had already contrived after much argument to carry against her: there was to be no parish work of any kind on that day for either of us. As with most parsons, it had long been a custom with me to keep the Monday of each week rigorously as a day of rest. Sundays, for the parish priest who is single-handed, are always trying days both for body and mind, with their long array of services, and much standing, and the thrilling yet exhausting strain of two or three sermons to preach. But for Linda, this particular Sunday had laid, as I could well perceive, an imperious exaction on her powers. Though her eyes were bright, it was a very weary brightness that I saw in them as she looked at me over the snow-white damask and glittering china and silverware of the table.

I had won my first point, but the contest had warmed me, and I could not leave it just for the present.

"Why," said I, "you will never last out as a parson's

wife if you take everything so intensely as you have been doing these three days. What has really happened? You have had to meet and talk to a crowd of strange, but all very kind-hearted people. And you have been stared at, and smiled at, and bobbed at, by a good many more. That is all. And yet here you are nearly worn out with it. You will never learn to drive the machine, if it means also driving yourself at this killing pace."

I saw a spot of crimson come and go in each of her pale cheeks. She sat awhile studying the pattern of the tablecloth, tracing it out with the tip of one white taper finger. But when she looked up it was with that sudden laugh of hers, clear and low, which always stabbed me to the quick, albeit with joy.

"I'm not a bit tired," said she, with serene defiance, "only a little killed by kindness, and just a little frightened at it all, perhaps. But oh! wasn't it funny in the churchyard after morning service? You missed that part of my ovation—you and your churchwardens were out so late. Lady Admington holding fast to my elbow, and parading me before all that fashionable crowd. And old Mrs. Marks and her family lined up outside, their smiles making a sort of second sunshine for me. And dozens of people all in their Sunday best, dotted about among the gravestones and green bushes, and all whispering and pointing me out to each other when I passed, as though I were royalty! And oh! Frank, what is the name of the sprightly little organist with the corkscrew ringlets and big spectacles? I think I liked her best of all."

"There you go again!" said I. "Out of breath in a moment and all of a tremble, and your cheeks like two apples, just at the mere recollection of a few friendly words and kind glances from people you have

never seen before in your life. But the little organist? Her name is Harriet Lisle: she is the younger of two sisters here—very great friends of mine. And that reminds me. We must go and see Jane—the invalid one, you know. We might take her on our way to the Downs this morning: their house is only just at the top of the street."

As presently Linda and I went over the weedy cobbles of the Square together, I think I looked at her almost as much as did any of the village people we met. She had a sweetly old-fashioned way of dressing herself, old-fashioned even for Fairthorne, itself commendably behind the times in this respect. Our village women still wore the ancient sun-bonnet, or at least those who were astute enough to realise how charmingly it became old and young alike; and among the more elderly of the men, the archaic Sussex round-frock was still a common sight in our streets. Linda was clad in a simple grey cotton gown, and upon her head was a sort of poke of straw out of the shady depths of which her sweet face shone like a narcissus. The bonnet had a wide blue ribbon to it—much of a colour with her calm eyes. The ribbon knotted itself with seeming crumpled carelessness beneath her firm but dainty chin; and round her neck she wore chain and locket of gold—that and the ring upon her hand, both of my giving, the only ornaments I ever knew her wear.

As we went along side by side towards the Spy House, I thought I would prepare her a little for the kind of visit this was to be.

"My poor Jane Lisle," said I, as the house hove into view jutting out at the far crook of the street; "you will like her, I know; and I am sure she will take to you. But her infirmity makes her difficult at times, and she is not without enemies here. In fact, she has

plenty, as you will soon find out. And, as you will also soon find out, they are mostly of one kind of people —people with a kink in their otherwise worthy natures; either lovers of malicious tittle-tattle, or habitual twisters of the truth, or those inclined to be hard on other people's faults, and so on. With these, Jane Lisle is apt to hit out straight from the shoulder—too straight sometimes for everyone's peace of mind. But here we are at the house. And we will just walk in at the open door—no need to knock. Jane is sure to have seen us coming, and will be expecting us."

But I was wrong there, for perhaps the first time in my life. When we had tiptoed over the immaculately polished parqueterie of the hall, and had noiselessly entered Jane Lisle's room, we found her lying back in the great armchair by the window, her eyes closed and apparently asleep. A book lay open in her lap, her two thin blue-veined hands clasped upon it. A bright coloured piece of knitting work was on the table at her side among a whole battery of little flower-vases all containing wild flowers. There was no sound in the dim room but the fitful pecking and scratching of two tiny green parakeets in their cage in a corner.

Linda put a restraining hand upon my arm. She drew back towards the door and would have drawn me with her, but that at that instant Jane Lisle opened her eyes. She peered at us sharply for a moment. Then her look changed to sudden glad recognition.

"Oh, the Sunset Bride! Mrs. Odling has not eaten you at sight then, as we all feared! Give me your hand, my dear, and forgive me for sticking to my chair: you will have been told what a helpless cripple I am. And you, Frank! Welcome to you both! Sit you down together on the couch there, and let me take a real long look at you."

It was indeed a long look, and a strong and keenly appraising look, that she bent now gravely enough upon the pair of us, or rather mainly upon Linda sitting quietly by my side. Her glance grew keener and colder as she gazed. I began to feel a doubt as to the way Linda might take this rather inquisitorial proceeding.

"You come from quite a fair-sized little town, don't you?" Jane Lisle asked of Linda at last: not unkindly, but with ever so fine an edge upon her tone.

"Yes."

"Plenty of friends there, and street-noises, and lots to do all day long?"

"Yes."

"And you have known your husband ever since his clerical babyhood, haven't you?"

"Yes."

Every time Linda returned her the quiet monosyllable, she managed to convey by it an entirely different shade of acquiescence. The last Yes, though without a trace of anything that could be called resentment at Jane's interrogatory, yet so plainly revealed wonder and dawning distaste for this manner of talk, that I began to grow uneasy. It was evidently one of Jane Lisle's bad days, of which of late she had had many. She reached for her knitting and fell to work, but continued to look at Linda with the same probing, fathoming eyes. Her next questions made me more uneasy still. They were put with what I could not forbear seeing was downright disfavour.

"But you are not afraid already—are you?—that you are going to be buried alive here? You won't be trying in a few months to take him away from us all and get him to exchange for some town-living, where I know he will be miserable and his private

literary work impossible? Your love for him is to be a real help and blessing in his life, is it not?—not a hindrance, a misfortune, like that?"

I was about as miserable at that moment as I well could be. I threw an appealing glance at Jane which she met and stonily repelled. Whereupon I grew desperate. I got upon my legs determinedly.

"We will go now, I think," said I, "and come again to-morrow, next day, any time when—when you are fit to——"

But at that Linda gently pulled me down again by her side. "I am driving now," she whispered. The next moment she had crossed the room and knelt down by Jane Lisle's chair. Murmured words that I could not catch passed between the two. I could scarce believe my eyes when I saw Jane Lisle's strong, pain-worn, clever face break down into the weakness of sudden tears. She held Linda fast with one arm, the while she looked round towards me, beckoning.

"She found me out, Frank!"

How I wondered to see the woman who for half a lifetime had never flinched under physical pain, thus helplessly dissolved by another's gentle patience and understanding sympathy!

"She found me out. She knew I was only seeking to test her mettle—to make her angry. It is only in anger that some women speak the truth. And I wanted so to—to make sure—— But I am sure of her now, Frank. You have got at last the one thing you have most needed all your life. Someone very near to you to take the brunt of the parish work off your shoulders. You can get to your other work again now in real earnest, and with a quiet heart. There will be one now by your side fit to stand ward and watch over you while that golden pen of yours drives on from

day to day shaping your thoughts into noble books. What more can either of you ask of life ? "

I came very slowly to a full grasp of her meaning. But that last exulting question brought it home to me. Noble books ! I too knelt down then, side by side with Linda. My arm stole round her waist as together we looked into the white, drawn face of the woman in the chair.

" Jane—my dear old friend ! " said I, drawing Linda closer and closer to me with every word, " all sorts of strange things have happened to me these last months, and you may think this the strangest of any. I am never going to write another line as long as I live. All that miserable vanity is over and done with for ever. I am like a man wakened out of a deep poppy-sleep ; wakened by a woman's love—saved, if you like. It is thus God has made clear to me His will at last. And His will is that I am just to be His minister—that, and that only—to these His people here in this tiny green nook of the world. You will say that this is nothing new in my life, that I have been all this to them for twenty years and more. A few days back I would have said the same. But now I know how blindly neglectful I have been, how wretchedly I have failed in it all, and here is the one who has taught me—one who, for near upon thirty years, has waited, watching my life in silence from afar ; keeping herself pure and holy and alone all that time so that, when the call came, she would be ready and able to lift me up out of the dust. And we are to labour in this ministry together, Jane ; she and I together side by side, to spend ourselves and be spent in His service so long as we both shall live. Isn't that unspeakably glorious ! Your own words are the only words to tell it in. ' What more can either of us ask of life ? ' "

Jane Lisle had heard me through with a grave and puzzled intentness of glance bent at first on each of us in turn and pretty equally. But as I warmed and speeded up, getting at last into a sort of white-hot hurry of utterance that I was powerless to restrain, she left off looking at me and looked only at Linda. When I had finished, she still looked at Linda, and that silently and long.

"Well, so be it," she said at length, and stopped. The knitting needles clicked on for a troubled moment or two. Suddenly Jane Lisle flung the work aside. "What about your health, child?" she cried, in so sharp a tone that I felt Linda start in my arms. "You are too slight and pale. And your eyes are too large and bright for my liking. You look as if you lived on a mere sparrow-peck. Frank there—fat and jolly and fit as a fiddle, and strong as an ox—he will stand any amount of hard going in our rough, steep ways. But how will you fare?—you who are used, perhaps, to no more than tiptoeing once or twice a day across a street?"

Linda stood up against this fusillade with cheery equanimity.

"I am well enough—sound as a bell—and always have been," she roundly declared, the words immediately tripped up by that deep quick laugh of hers that proved the bell-like quality of her voice, at any rate. She hesitated a little. Then she took one of the thin, blue-veined hands within her own and fell to stroking it gently.

"Perhaps," she went on, her voice now hushed and slow, "perhaps my life has—has not been quite—quite the kind of life that makes for——I mean teaching little children indoors all day long and year after year; and then living quite alone in a tiny school-house up a back

street of an out-of-the-way country-town, fending for myself in everything, and seeing hardly any new faces. And—and then so many old memories, and so many old thoughts to think——"

"I know, child, I know!"

The one grey-headed undisguisedly: the other with the plentiful silver twines sunk deep in the still luxuriant brown—much of an age indeed, and yet that word 'child' between them! A hard hot lump came into my throat. I went and stood awhile in the corner watching the two little ancient green parakeets—love-birds, I think they call them, and they might have had some right to the name a few decades back. The two sat side by side fondly rubbing their old scraggy emerald heads together, and perfectly enraged me. I went back to my place by Jane Lisle's chair just in time to hear her say, as she had said before, "Well, so be it—I believe in you both, God knows."

CHAPTER V

THE GARGOYLE MAN

On leaving the Spy House, Linda and I soon won clear of Fairthorne village and got upon the steep chalk path that led to the Downs.

It was one of those rare days n Downland, rare even for halcyon September—a day of absolute calm, and mellow amber sunshine, and a sky of unsullied blue not stretching overhead alone but shedding its intense colour down to earth on all sides and mingling with all the shadows far and near. Every gorse-brake and every stunted juniper bush on our way seemed to have drawn some of the blue down into its depths. A little way onward, the whiteness of the rough chalk path was creviced with this all-pervading azure. The martins skimming across and across our way, seemed each to be chevying a flying spot of blue as their shadows sped before them over the dewy turf.

There was little said between us as we climbed steadily upward side by side, the white line of the precipitous track ever dwindling until at last it sank into the green. At the outset I had taken Linda's hand in mine, not so much to help her up the steep ascent as to restrain her eagerness for pressing onward. She could do nothing unfervently, it seemed; and the pace

of her thoughts ever seemed to determine the pace of her feet. Now she would have mounted the green sunny heights like an antelope, had I let her.

"Gently, gently!" I was compelled to remonstrate at last, myself not a little out of breath. "This was to be an idle, easy ramble, not a race for a wager."

At that she broke from me, sped forward a little, then stopped and turned, her glad eyes dancing, the blood alight in her two cheeks.

"I am going to live here—truly live, Frank!" she cried, taking a luxurious sniff at our sweet highland air. "Oh, how good it all is! Listen to the larks! You can't see them. But you know there must be dozens of them up there, by the constant rain of music they send down. And the sheep-bells tolling so quietly all round us, and the sheep looking like scattered tufts of thistledown far away on every hillside. And then the flowers!—look at them shining everywhere deep in the grass! How wonderful!—you would never have dreamed it, with the hills all looking so burnt and brown from below. And the grasshoppers chirruping, and the little blue and copper butterflies, a whole cloud of them, drifting on before us as we go! And, oh!——"

She fell suddenly mute. The straw poke hung by its ribbon from her hand. The other hand was shading her eyes as she looked away across the rolling waste of hill and dale.

"Who is this coming?" she asked. And before I had made out anything in human form within the nearest mile of gorse-clad Down—"Oh, the Gargoyle Man!—the Admingtons' Egyptian friend—coming straight towards us. Oh, dear!—we didn't want company just now, did we? What is to be done, Frank?"

"Done?" said I, "why, just give him good-day and

let him go by. He will probably be as pleased as ourselves."

We held on over the great heather-mantled plateau, giving the advancing figure as wide a berth as decency would permit. But the Gargoyle Man was not to be thus evaded. On seeing us from afar, he deflected his course and came directly for us ; and I looked at him as he drew nigh with suddenly awakened interest.

He made an uncommon, even an impressive figure. He was tall and powerfully built. He went bare-headed and bare-foot, carrying his boots slung over his shoulder by their laces. A large, comfortable-looking pipe stuck out of his mouth, and he wore his shirt-collar open, displaying a massive sunburnt throat and breast. As he pulled up at last, a dozen paces off, shin-deep in the purple heather, he showed us an extra-ordinarily fine, yet hard and grim Scottish face, its big square forehead surmounted by a shock of rufous curls. The hard face softened momentarily into what I could not help noticing to be a wonderfully tender, winning smile as he bent towards Linda with an almost courtier-like grace and deference. For me he had a quick, humorous jerk at one of his carroty forelocks.

" Yours are the first human faces I have seen since daybreak, barring the shepherds'," said he. " Up early ? Why, yes : you see, I have this new reredos scheme for Marshminster Cathedral to puzzle out, and I can always think best when my feet are jogging along. Besides, the Manor House isn't exactly an ideal place for quiet thought—too many noisy game-players and squealing little dogs about. Sir Andrew and Lady Admington are most awfully kind and all that, of course. But I know I am a bit of a damper at their feast, and I am sure everybody will be glad when I push off in a few days' time."

Marshminster reredos, with its cramped and crowded marble saints in their mean stone niches, and major lines all running the wrong way, horizontally instead of vertically, holding it to earth instead of letting it soar heavenward, had long been a prime grievance among the clergy of the diocese. I was at once keenly interested in Garth's news.

"You must come into the Rectory one evening and tell us all about your plans," said I. "When is the work to be started? It will take a long time, no doubt. Are you going to live in Marshminster, then, until all is done?"

"I shall stay hereabouts," he returned, "from now onward till the last stone is up. But I am not going quite so far as you suppose. In fact, I am not even leaving the village here. Sir Andrew—— Of course you know a little crib called 'The Blue Bottles'?"

"Right at the far western end of the village—where the hazel-woods begin? Yes, I know it well. It used to be the under-keeper's cottage, but no one has lived there for a long time. You are surely not thinking of——"

"Yes, I am. It is all arranged, and Sir Andrew is having it done up for me post-haste. I hope to be installed there within the week. Just the sort of place I love—smothered all over in ivy, and yellow jasmine, and such like, and haunted by every kind of wild singing bird. I shall make it my country-quarters, going to and fro from Marshminster every day or so until the work is finished."

He stood there telling us all this in a pleasant, brisk, resonant voice that had only the merest trace of a Scottish accent to it, and none at all of the Scottish idiom. He shifted the heavy nail-studded boots to his other shoulder, seemed to think a bit, then came a little nearer.

"You have been the clergyman of this parish a very long time, I believe, sir?" he said, hesitantly. "And you know all about everyone here, no doubt? And have the interest of all very much at heart? I wonder if you would mind my asking you a rather peculiar question?"

"I don't mind your *asking* any question," I began, cautiously, when he pulled me up.

"Of course, of course! And I quite understand when you have heard my question you may think fit not to—to——"

He stopped, and now he was looking not at me but at Linda, and that pretty searchingly. He seemed to have stumbled upon an unexpected difficulty. Linda essayed to help him out.

"I will walk on a little by myself, and leave you two to talk alone," said she, smilingly moving off.

Garth let her go some twenty paces. And then, impetuously, almost vehemently, he called her back.

"Forgive me, Mrs. Benison. What a fool I am! Why, it was to you even more than to the Rector I wanted to put my question, or confidence, or confession, or criticism on human nature, whatever it is—frankly, I don't know. May I turn and walk a little way with you? I must move or I can't think, you know."

At that the three of us started up the green broad 'ride' through the blossoming heather, Linda in the centre, with our two pipes making a sort of halo of smoke about her head. Garth was silent for a minute or so.

"What does it mean," he blurted out at last, "when a man meets a woman, and in a moment that woman becomes the only one in the world for him, though she will not as much as give him two words or half a glance

from end to end of a day, but seems to rate him at about the value of the dust on her shoes? And what does it mean when, after about a week of this cold-drawn torture, the man suddenly finds himself positively sweating in a warmth of unceasing smiles and kind looks and friendly hand-pressures—when he is sought out deftly in every crowd, and chances of delicious tête-à-têtes put constantly in his way, and he is driven nearly wild with joy at it all, in spite of the fact that he feels and knows there is some mystery of black thunder-cloud hanging all the time over his new sunshine? Yet the beautiful light shines on incredibly day after day, week after week. It seems so real—it *must* be real, the man keeps saying to himself, though he cannot help being aware that the nameless black cloud grows bigger and blacker than ever. *That* must be just a delusion, he humbugs himself into believing—some counterpoise mercifully given him to help him keep his reason, which is in danger, he knows, of breaking through very joy. And the light holds brightly to the end of the first chapter, when there is a parting, but many promises of meetings in old England in happy times sure and soon to come. Yes, and here is Chapter Two, with the man in old England again sure enough, having cut his holiday short, there being no more power left in him for breathing a different air from that breathed by the wielder of the smiles and glances. Here he is, not only breathing the same air but sitting day after day at the same table. Yet, instead of being deliriously, outrageously happy now, he is living in unspeakable wretchedness and blindness of doubt. Why? Because all the ice-cold, razor-edged torture is back in his life. He is the dust on the shoes again. He might be ten thousand million miles away from the woman now, for all she seems to know of, or care for,

his presence. Why has she changed again? What does it mean? That is the question I beseech you two mercifully to answer for me. *Is* there an answer? Don't you see that I am fretting my heart out at the cruel mystery of it all?"

The passion, intense, yet sternly dragooned and subdued, with which he poured out this story in our ears, left us, when he had given over speaking and fallen into a sullen silence, just as mute as himself. The air seemed still to throb with it. We kept on at his side for awhile both looking speechlessly, commiserately, into his flushed dark face. With a shaking thumb and forefinger he rammed some more tobacco into his burnt-out pipe, and, lighting it, sent the smoke in dense, quick puffs driving away pell-mell before him on the sunny air. It was Linda's voice that first broke in upon this tragic mute interlude, yet hardly broke it indeed, so gentle and slow were her words.

"But why did you call me back, Mr. Garth? I have known her only a day or two. I know nothing of her really. Only my husband here can——"

"Why did I call you back?—because you are a woman, and a woman alone can solve a mystery like this. What do men know of the ins and outs of a woman's mind?—nothing! not even the cleverest and holiest among them. Mrs. Benison, dear Mrs. Benison, read me the riddle if you can."

Linda laughed. I have seen her faced by all sorts of difficult situations, grave as well as gay, and she has always laughed sooner or later, but never has the laugh been untimely or out of grace. This time it was a laugh of gentle expostulation, with the merest touch of what I would call amusement, if it were not altogether too brutally definite a word for the thing.

"But I see no riddle at all, Mr. Garth. Here you

are, making your headquarters in an Eastern city, where there is only one presentable hotel, and where, of course, everyone puts up in holiday-time. You meet a young lady among the crowd and probably go a little too fast with her, whereupon she administers what she regards as a much-needed check. But you persevere, and at length her reserve is beaten down, and she is even a little sorry for her past studied repulsion of you. But again, probably, you go too fast. She cannot repeat her former tactics, or perhaps does not want to, now. It has been only a holiday adventure in a far-off land, she may tell herself, just a little passing side-show in her life. And, besides, a young woman always feels flattered at the persistent attentions of a man; and sees no harm in favouring them a little, or even a good deal,—nothing need follow, unless she chooses—it is so far away from home. In this case, it seems, she does not choose, or at least does not choose at present. But where is the riddle? You yourself prove to me that you do not look at things quite so desperately as your words make out, because you have done a very sensible thing—quite the thing I should advise if your own adroit good sense had not forestalled me."

Garth pulled up at that and, turning, stared Linda point-blank in the face.

"What on earth can you mean, Mrs. Benison? What is it I have done, then?"

"Why, you have refused to take a woman at her word, and that is always what a man should do, provided, of course, that he does not himself deserve the same treatment from her side. But you are sure of your own heart. Your conscience is clear. And it was very clever of you to take the cottage, Mr. Garth. It is two birds with the one stone, don't you see?

You appear to be yielding to what the lady seems to desire by promptly removing your unwelcome presence. But you are really keeping within easy beck and call, and so giving opportunity its due chance to influence events."

At that the low laugh came again. In its sweet implication of trust in a providential helping-hand for all earnest, honest traffickings of life, it sounded in my ears as though it were part and parcel with the carolling of the larks up in the blue sky. The Gargoyle Man's face had been visibly clearing while she spoke.

"But what," said he, "of the dark shadow of something for ever looming in the background, that I always felt yet cannot describe? It was just as if some great secret trouble had fallen upon her, quenching all the happiness and hope in her life. And the kinder she grew, the more a conviction of the reality of this thing between us grew upon me. Sometimes I have thought it is a thing that only a minister of religion can get down to; you know what I mean?—some spiritual trouble, or even some fancied wrong she has committed which is preying on her mind. And another thing——"

His voice failed. He slackened in his long deliberate stride, then halted and brought us also to a standstill by getting in front of us. His glance searched each of our faces in turn, finally settling on mine.

"I must be boring you to death, both of you," he hesitated, still eyeing me alone. "But the honest truth is I have not, even yet, asked the question I wanted to ask in the beginning. I can see now it is only you, sir, who can answer it—you who have known her so long. Do you—think that——— Is there any other man in the case? I would give all the gold in the Indies to know!"

They stood one on each side of me, both eyeing me now, I could feel, though my own glance was turned away. A crow was winging its solitary way across the blue. I watched it until it vanished over the far-off hill. Then I turned squarely to the Gargoyle Man.

"That is a question which it would not be right for me to answer," I said, "even—even if I could."

He reflected a moment.

"I see," he returned. And again, still pondering, "I see." The next instant his face curiously changed. A sort of dogged determination and defiance swept across it. "Well, one man is as good as another till the battle is decided," he said. "At any rate, I'll stick to 'Blue Bottles' and give my luck a chance."

CHAPTER VI

AFTERMATH

THE gem-bright day had a cloudy ending. Twilight gathered over the village before its time, and when I went across to the church to take evensong, the little side-chapel was so whelmed in deep shadow that I had to kindle the vesper-lights on the altar before I could see to read.

There was no need for other illumination. I was quite alone in the old church, as I expected I should be. Linda had volunteered to come, but she was tired from her long day's march over the Downs, and I had persuaded her to stay at home for this once. I knelt down in my white surplice at the little reading-desk just outside the sanctuary rail all alone in the empty silence, and began to read.

After long use, the words of the beautiful old English service had grown so familiar to me that I had little need for the book. I knelt there within the one little charmed circle of light that enshrined the glimmering brass of cross and candlesticks, the rainbow glow of the flowers in the vases, the embroidered richness of the altar-piece. But my eyes were wandering most of the time up among the dark forest-roof of oaken beams far overhead, or down the colonnades of great stone

pillars that stood in the body of the church, their whiteness now dim and ghostly in the gloom.

Though I glanced only now and then at the book, it was in no conventional, perfunctory spirit that I went through the quaint old prayers one after the other, reading aloud indeed, but only very softly, and this from custom's sake alone. Every word that passed my lips came from the deeps of a truly thankful heart, as I well remember acknowledging to myself. For who was there in the whole world, the thought came to me, with better reason to be thankful to God at that moment than I ?

One by one, though I never let a single word of what I was repeating fall heedlessly from my lips—one by one, I went over my new blessings in an upper, detached region of my mind. My old lonely, blind, self-absorbed life was over and done with for ever, glory be to God. I had been like some mediæval monk in his cell crouching day after day, year after year, over a piece of intricate, useless illumination-work some day destined only to go to dust like himself—laboriously tracing out futile line after line, and blocking in senseless fictile colour upon colour, under one dim steep, mote-ridden ray from a barred slot in a three-foot wall, the while the sun shone outside, the wild flowers bloomed, and the birds winged their free way across the sky.

Over and done with for ever—to God be the glory ! For the angel had come into the gloom of the cell, and the fetters of blindness had been struck off, and the iron-studded door had opened of its own accord. And I had been led forth into the glad real daylight of the world as it truly was as God had made it ; a world white with the harvest that I knew now—at long last, yet not too late—I was called to help gather in.

And then, as I turned to the General Thanksgiving

and fell to reciting its grand sweet cadences, a new meaning seemed to dawn for me in every one, but in one most of all. "Not only with our lips, but in our lives." That came poignantly home to me. That had been my cardinal fault and failing all those wasted years. Lip-service without heart-service. In the first my ministry had been diligent enough within these old walls. But all the real heart-service had been done to another god in my study at home, the god of personal ambition, love of seeing my name in print set there laudably by next-to-nobodies, and love of knowing myself talked about in the world.

I finished the old Elizabethan pæan, and let my tongue flow on gratefully, humbly, through the prayer of St. Chrysostom, until the murmured monotone grew still in the beautiful "Grace" of St. Paul that makes so fitting an end to all prayer whether of worship, petition or praise.

I closed the book, but did not move for a while. In the body of the church it had now fallen quite dark. I could see nothing in that direction but the faint grey rectangle of the western door which I had left open on my entry. Still kneeling, I turned my face away from the yellow radiance of the altar lights, and fixed my gaze on that grey patch of outer gloaming fretted here and there with a twinkling point of gold —lights in some of the village windows. The sight of homes lit up at eventide for rest, refreshment, recreation, made me think of my own home hard by, where the lamps must by now be kindled and putting forth a welcoming shine for my own return. At the thought, I bent in one more prayer of intense, heartfelt, humble yet joyous thanksgiving, and rose to go.

But at that moment, chancing to look down through the darkness towards the western door, I stopped—

looked again more intently. There was someone standing there now : the figure, I thought, of a woman silhouetted against the grey twilight-pallor beyond. Linda, without a doubt. She had come to fetch me, of course, finding my return delayed so unconscionably. To have someone now whose joy and duty it was to hail me homeward !—what a precious thing that had become in my life, all in a few short days ! The figure moved—passed into the gloom of the church. I heard slow steps advancing up the nave. Standing on the sanctuary steps in my white surplice with the golden glow of the altar-lights flowing from behind me and losing itself in the black obscurity that I faced, I stood watching, waiting, and at last a little wondering. The as-yet invisible oncomer checked her advance more than once, each time resuming her gait more slowly, more hesitantly than ever. At length she began to draw dimly into the outermost rim of illumination. A dark-clad figure too tall and much too amply built for Linda—that much I had made out at the first glimpse of it. And at the second, it suddenly came over me who it was.

" Valerie ! "

The irrepressible ring of disappointment in my voice as, almost involuntarily I uttered the name, was so patent to myself that I feared it must have sounded like downright rudeness even to a total stranger, which Valerie Thrapp certainly was not. I came down into the transept to meet her.

" You here, Valerie ? I thought you went with Sir Andrew to Stavisham Horse Fair to-day to see the Manor colts sold ? But perhaps you got back earlier than usual. Sir Andrew is back too, of course ? "

She was in her riding-habit that fitted her full figure like a glove. With one hand she had its skirts gathered

together behind her, in the other she held the big hunting whip I knew so well, with its stout, heavily-loaded handle. As she looked down she threshed softly with this implement at her high top-boot.

"No; he stayed behind to settle with the grooms and the rest. And I came away, as I had a bad headache. But the ride in the cool air has driven it off."

"Was not that rather risky?"

She laughed.

"Risky? For me to ride alone, do you mean?"

"No, I mean to leave Sir Andrew alone among all that hard-drinking market crowd. I should have thought——"

I stopped. I had forgotten where I was in the sudden anxiety that had come over me at her words. I had spoken much too loudly. I dropped my voice.

"Well, we must hope all will be right. The headache has gone then, has it, Valerie? It sounds so odd to hear you talking of headaches—you who used to be always in such perfect trim. All this rushing about in hot weather from one foreign city to another must be bad for anyone. I am glad you are back again to your old quiet busy life."

She still kept her glance down, still threshed softly, steadily, at her long glittering boot. But at my last words she flashed up a keen look straight into my eyes.

"You glad? Whatever should you be glad about? Your voice sounded anything but glad just now when you first saw who it was. And you are in a desperate hurry to be going to someone else now. I am only keeping you against your will, I know."

The black bright eyes, the rich dark tan and scarlet of her handsome face, with its almost virile strength and squareness, the lips pressed tight together in a thin red line, heavy loops of dark hair wellnigh covering

the ears, the short sharp sentences rapped out one after the other like shots from a mitrailleuse—it was all exactly the Valerie Thrapp I had known so well of old, and yet it was all new in some indefinable way that awoke in me, for the first time then, a curious misgiving.

"No! you are wrong, indeed. I am really and truly glad to have you back, and at your old work for the church. Why! how many years is it since you became my sacristan? Nearer four than three, I know."

She was looking down again now, and the hunting-whip had restarted its old soft tune on the boot. For a moment or two she seemed to think intensely.

"Yes, it will be four years in a week or so from now. Four happy years, for me at least. Oh, how I wish I had never——"

"Never what?" I asked, for she had pulled up precipitately. She was plainly feverish and overwrought. She looked hard at me again, much as she had done before, yet even more eagerly.

"You—you remember what—what happened here at this very spot only—only a month or two before. It was all exactly like it is now, wasn't it?—only it was Sunday evening, a dull autumn evening and almost dark, and I had remained behind after the service, and—and I asked you to—to——"

Her voice faltered into silence again. Her breath was coming hard and quick now. Her dark bright eyes seemed to be trying to carry on from the point where words had failed her.

"Why bring all that back again, Valerie?" I said. "That is all dead and buried—all wiped out and done with—all forgiven and, I had hoped, forgotten by everyone concerned. Why, it is years and years ago! You only do yourself a wrong by letting it trouble you for a moment now."

"Yes, yes! I know, I know! You saved me from God only knows what—disgrace, prison, perhaps even worse! Sir Andrew—by himself, he might never have . . . I know it was you and you alone who won me another chance—got me forgiveness, and the whole thing settled and hushed up with the bank, and kept my position for me, no one in Fairthorne ever guessing what I had done! Yes, I know all that is dead and buried, as the world looks at these things. I—I was not really thinking of that at all. It was something else quite——"

She turned then, looking back for one tense silent moment at the little altar in the side-chapel still softly aglow. She laid a trembling hand upon my arm.

"Oh, Mr. Benison, come now, *now*, and let me kneel down before you just as I did that other time long ago. Oh, I must tell you, and I cannot tell you in any other way! I came back from Stavisham to do it—I had no other reason. It was a lie I told you just now about the headache. I knew you would be here at this time, here alone. And—and I couldn't bear it any longer! Oh, come now and hear me as—as a stranger—as my confessor—just as you did that first time we met so long ago!"

At that she glided away from me and, with bent head and clasped hands, went and knelt down upon the sanctuary steps. For a moment I stood looking amazedly, helplessly, at the dark bowed figure. And then, as in duty bound, I followed her, quietly brought out the faldistory, and sat down close by. I was infinitely perplexed and mystified. But clearly there was nothing else to be done.

"Tell me what the trouble is," said I, "and if I can help you——"

She stopped me with a cry, low and stifled, of

pain. With one strong convulsive movement she drew her body up erect from the knees, her face now uplifted to the glittering brazen cross before her. She folded her two hands across her heaving breast. Very gently then tears began to make slow runlets down her cheeks.

"Don't you know? Haven't you ever guessed?"

The words came low and broken from her quivering lips.

"In all these years have you never—never—once suspected? . . . But at first, I know, it was only just intense gratitude—just pure deep thankfulness for deliverance—yes, from death! For I could never have faced life again if—if—— Oh, you must have known! You must have seen how—how I—I—— Day after day, and month after month, as we met here alone, and you took such pains to teach me all I had to do! Yet I did not even myself know until—until one day it all came to me in a moment, and I saw that—that it was not thankfulness to you any more, but—but—— Oh, I saw it all then!—all that you had become for me! And then my whole life changed: it was an entirely new life in a new world that began for me from that day. Such a queer sort of life—just a drear blank when we were apart, and just mad reckless happiness when I was near you. And did you really, *really* never guess? No, no! you could not have known! I used sometimes to think you did. But it must have been only insane self-deception. Insane, yes! I can see now I was not myself all through that time. And when we all went away abroad after Sir Andrew's last attack, I went just as mad, just as self-deceived as ever. Oh, what a day of reckoning was in store for me! That letter from Mrs. Marks telling me all about—about your coming marriage!—isn't it wonderful how per-

fectly beautiful devout natures can sometimes lapse into studied, downright gleesome cruelty? Do you believe in hearts breaking? Well; mine broke then. Broke first, and then turned to stone. And how can a woman live when her heart is just a broken stone? Answer me that, reverend father! Or pray to God to answer it for me—for us both. Unless—unless——"

"Unless what, Valerie?" I cried to her. I scarce knew my own voice, so husky and strange it seemed. Slowly she turned and looked at me through a hot blur of tears.

"Unless you hold yourself free from any share of blame in this," she said, and flung herself down there on the steps at my feet, her face buried in her two arms.

In the silent minutes that followed, silent but for the sobbing of the girl beneath me, I sat staring out into the darkness of the church with unseeing eyes. And then I bent and ventured a hand upon her shoulder.

"Valerie, my dear, dear girl! No! very far from it. It is not you alone who should confess, but I should confess with you. I know I have given you in these past times many looks, yes! and many words, that must have—have seemed, however they were meant, like—like words of—— Oh, my dear, my dear! I am only human, only a man, with the weaknesses and vanities that all men have. And you were so radiant, so entrancing in all you did. Yet I swear to you, here in this place and before the One we both serve, that I never, never once thought of—there being anything, even the slightest, feeling from your side. It never once entered my head. Why! you are a young and blooming girl, and I am an old man, almost!—nearly a lifetime separating us. How could ever such a thought be mine?"

"What did it matter?" The words came up to me sobbingly, smothered by her sleeve, well-nigh inaudible. "That was all nothing to me—the difference in our ages. Nothing, nothing to me. Why then anything to you? Oh, I would have so loved, and cherished, and served, and guarded you! It is all too cruel, too cruel! Oh God! how can I live, now that—that——"

"Hush, hush!"

Desperately I had gone down on my knees now by her side.

"Valerie, do you not see what I have to do? And how hard you make it for me? All that you have told me, dear, has fallen like sudden black darkness of night across my path, just when I was walking in brilliant noonday light. For the moment I am blinded, dazed. I can see nothing as yet, except—except one thing. But that thing very clearly. I must say the word. One of us has been living under a terrible misapprehension. I am to blame for that as much, perhaps more, than you, I know. But—but the mistake was not mine. It was yours, yours only. And you alone can bear the consequences of it. There is only one thing to be done. What you have told me must be faithfully kept a secret between us two. We must go on living our separate lives exactly as we always have lived them. You must carry on with your work for the church and the parish exactly as——"

"No, no!"

She had turned up to me a flushed and tear-stained face imploringly.

"No! That I can never do. I must leave Fairthorne. I must go away somewhere at once—go right away for ever, and try—try to——"

"Valerie, that must not be."

She looked at me in a sort of panic of surprise.

"You cannot, surely, want me to—to remain, when all the time you would know I—I——"

"And you cannot, surely, want to turn more hearts here into broken stones than there are already. Do you not see that, in this hotbed of tittle-tattle and general meddling with other people's private concerns, the first story that would go round the place like wildfire, if you were suddenly to leave, would connect our two names together? Of late, even I have had some kind of idea that we were being talked about. Can you not see that your going might—might turn out to be my utter undoing? That it might wreck my whole life's happiness just when it has only begun?"

Whether she listened as I spoke, I knew not, so still and mute she lay with her averted face pillowed on her sleeve. But now she got slowly to her feet.

"I will do anything—anything," she cried, brokenly, "if only it can serve you. But how will it be possible for me to go on exactly in the old way, as you wish? Of course there were hundreds of little things to do in the parish that could only be done by a woman, and these fell to me. But now there is a mistress at the Rectory, naturally she——"

"Valerie, you know so much, and are so thoroughly used to our ways, while she is wholly without any experience at all. Work with her, then: teach her: help her all you can. As time goes on, I believe you will see a light and a way through all difficulties. Who knows but in helping you may yourself find help? We are never tempted above that we are able, but a way is always found for us. You understand?"

Our hands met a moment warmly. Then she turned to the altar, and I saw its lights reflected in her great dark eyes as she made the sign of the cross upon her breast.

"I understand," she said, on the lightest breath. The next instant she turned, and without another look at me passed down into the darkness of the nave. I stood gazing after her until sight of her and sound of her quiet quick footsteps died away together. A little later, as I was locking the church-door, another sound grew into the stillness of the autumn night. Someone coming post-haste over the Square towards the church—heavy hobnail boots clattering upon the stones. A figure blundered right against me just as I reached the lichgate.

"Be ut you, Reverend? Ay, sure! 'Tis a letter from her Ladyship. They tould me as I'd find ye here."

It was one of the servants at the Manor—I knew him by his voice. I got the man to strike a match and hold it over me while I read the note.

"Dear Rector,"—it ran—"I am in great trouble. You will know why. Sir Andrew just brought home from Stavisham, and very poorly. Do come as soon as you can.

"SOPHIE ADMINGTON."

CHAPTER VII

A HOUSE OF CARE

STAYING only to put on my black cassock again, and hang an old silver crucifix about my neck, I was soon hurrying away with Lady Admington's messenger through the leafy lanes that led to the Manor House.

As we pounded along side by side in the darkness, I sounded the man to see whether he knew anything of the nature of our errand. I soon learned that he knew, or seemed to know, a great deal. He was obviously still excited over events which evidently had made a considerable stir up at the Manor, and these he forthwith detailed to me as coherently as our pace would allow.

"I *never* did! To be sure an' all!" he panted. "We all knowed whose voice 'twur, soon as we heerd it ever so fur away. They come in the closed carriage what they keeps at the King's Head at Stavisham—Sir Andrew hollerin' inside, and wi' him the doctor and a policeman. And another policeman outside with the driver. Dear, dear! only to think on't! Never a glass, they tell me, for six long months—and now! Dear, dear, oh Lor! I *never* did—no, not in all my born days! An' poor My Lady! Not a moment o' fuss, ner cryin' ner that. But 'deed ye could see! An' whiles they were getting poor maaster upstairs

atween the lot o'them, she just sat down and wrote the note to ye. Oh! there she be at the door waiting for ye."

As I climbed to the great main entry of the house over various broad balustrated terraces and up interminable flights of stone steps, the figure darkly erect against the brilliance of the lighted hall might have been a figure carved out of black marble. Without a word Lady Admington drew me into a little room near the entry, and closed the door.

"He is quieter now," she said. She spun round a moment magnificently with her back towards me, to make certain quick furtive dabs at her cheeks. "The doctor is still with him, but the—the others have gone, thank Heaven! Well, he will get over it, I suppose, just as he always has done. But as for that girl!"

"What girl?" said I, with incredible stupidity. But I was deeply obsessed at the moment with all that I foresaw might still lie before me in the case.

"What girl, Rector? Why, who else but Valerie Thrapp? I have her, and her alone, to thank for this. Fool that I was to trust her! She promised me she would never leave his side for an instant until he was safely home again. And see what her promises are worth. My poor darling!—left with that abominable crew!—thrown to the dogs! And she gadding off alone on her pleasures somewhere—no one knows where, and she will not say. Just creeping in at the back door only a few minutes ago, and hoping I should not mark it! But her return was reported to me, and—and, well, there has been a scene. I felt it my duty to—to—— Of course I know I have spoken severely. The occasion demanded it. Perhaps I did say some things which, but for the heat and distress of the moment, I—I—should not have said."

"You did not, of course, refer to—to what occurred with her years ago?" I asked, a sudden hot fright upon me. Lady Admington's vast pink countenance went several shades deeper under my gaze.

"I—I am afraid I did," she faltered, evidently a little sobered by my look. "But I was almost beside myself with all this terrible commotion in the house. And her absolute refusal to tell me where she had been all those hours since she left poor Sir Andrew in Stavisham! It was so insolent, so heartless, so—so ungrateful!"

I caught her up, appalled at the last word.

"Have you accused her, then, of ingratitude? You surely did not——"

"Yes, I did. But I was so very much upset, and—— You had better know the whole truth at once. I did say I thought her conduct showed the basest ingratitude. And then—of course you know her frightful temper—there was a scene, as I say. And she stormed off upstairs and slammed herself into her room. And there she can stop, for all I care!"

The door opened at that moment, and a grizzly head I knew well was thrust in, followed by a hand that peremptorily beckoned to me.

"I have got the delirium under all right at last," the doctor said, as we went up the stairs together. "He is fast asleep now. But he is a queer fish, as you know, and any moment he may break out again. He must be watched continuously all night, of course, and you are the only one I can trust. Don't take your eyes off him for a moment, Rector, whatever you do."

We had tiptoed into the great luxuriously furnished bedroom, with its shaded amber lights and the one deep sound lifting and falling in the silence—the heavy, stertorous breathing of the man on the bed.

The doctor and I stood a moment looking down upon the grey, distorted, incessantly twitching face. And then our eyes met.

"Frankly, I can't say," he whispered, answering my questioning look. "He may get over it once more of many times, or he may not—I shall know better when I come back in the morning to relieve you. But I must go now. And don't forget, whatever you do. If he rouses, bring your influence to bear on him at once, and if that fails——"

"But it will not fail."

Ever so slight a smile fled over the stern, rugged face, and a shrug lifted the broad shoulders a fraction of an inch for the merest fraction of a second.

"Well, there is mine at any rate," he said, handing me a charged hypodermic syringe. "You may not need it, and all the better anyway for his chance if you don't. Good-night."

Left alone, my first care was to make my preparations. I brought over a little table to the bedside, laid thereon the altar-cloth I had brought with me, and set upon it silver cross and candlesticks, and in the centre an old jewelled chalice and paten covered with a deeply laced veil—all the gift of my poor patron as thank-offering for recovery after just such another wild bout as this on a day long gone by. Then I sat down and scribbled a hasty note to Linda telling her of my whereabouts and the anxious task I had in hand for the night. I rang the bell and got the note sent off by a trusty messenger, and this done, fell to pacing to and fro in the room, stopping every now and again to look down at the face on the pillow.

What was this night to bring forth? I asked myself wearily, this last night of so many similar ones which Sir Andrew Admington and I had spent alone

together in exactly the same way and for the same reason.

Rich, nobly born, the eighth baronet of his line, endowed with commanding gifts of head and heart, the very soul of honour, loved by dependents and friends alike, and—all of it wasted, set utterly at nought, by this one mean, pitiable failing that was breaking his own heart equally with that of the faithful woman who was his wife. As I paced slowly across and across the great room, the thick, soft Eastern carpets effectually silencing my tread, I clenched my fists behind me in sudden anger—not anger at my friend, but at the social conditions that rendered such a disaster possible in a Christian land.

I tried to remember who it was—a right reverend bishop, I think—who said he would rather see Britain drunk and free than sober and enslaved. I went over in my mind one after the other all the famous drinking-songs I had ever heard, with their fine rollicking refrains; all the picture-advertisements of strong waters with hale hearty old gentlemen quaffing deep at goblets filled with what looked like liquid gold; all the screamingly funny things that had been written by the great popular writers of centuries past with drunkenness for their theme. There had been a time in my life, not so very long ago either, when I had applauded the luminous patriotism of the man of God, had felt my breast swell at the brave, compelling music, had laughed as heartily as all the rest of the world at the funny staggers and comical incoherence of all the great inebriates with which the masters of fiction up and down the ages had delighted millions and confounded knavish nazaritish tricks.

But since those rosy-spectacled days I had been given a little stern, real, naked-eyed vision as well

as taste and smell of the thing. Providence, that can be so kindly cruel at times, had taken me, as it were dog-like, by the scruff of the neck and rammed my face down hard into it. And now I was in no doubt of its ugly shape, and ill-flavour, and exceeding malodorousness. Its look and reek savoured indeed of the very Foul Fiend at this moment: as any interested, but not wilfully head-buried-in-the-sand, from the king's cup-bearer down to the humblest pothouse dram-seller can easily prove for themselves. As if there were any more abject slavery than the slavery of sottishness! As if there could be any freedom where there was such pitiful thraldom! As if fine glowing words set to glamorous music, or the divine art of humour prostituted to such an end, were anything more than commending to fools their folly, flower-strewing and rainbowing the steep place that leads only to death!

Ah, what a stomachful of the rank, bitter side of this thing I had had in these last years, and how little humour I could see in it all now!—I said to myself, as presently tired of this monotonous journeying to and fro between pictured walls and richly curtained bedside, I at length threw myself down in a great cushioned chair hard by, to stare at the old oak rafters of the ceiling, and wonder what the death-watch beetles up there thought of the whole grisly business.

Now and then, when the stertorous breathing of the drugged sleeper quietened for awhile, I could hear the steady tick-tick-tick of these unwearying little beasts making a sort of ghostly still-music far overhead; and the sudden thought came to me—was this premonitory? I could not remember having heard the sound in the room before when I had been engaged on like sad vigils in the past, with the same preparations made and ready for administration at my elbow should the

chance and need for them occur. But now the steady, dry tattoo went on and on, I could well believe, unremittingly, for every time the mimic smothered thunder from the pillow stilled a moment, there it was again, now fast, now slow, but never quite stopping—a very jubilee of foreboding that in my strained, fagged mood grew at last all but intolerable. After a minute or two I flung out of the chair and set forth again on the old monotonous journey to and fro.

The minutes drew slowly into hours. The hours went by leaden-winged, somniferous. At last I heard the far-away stable-clock disagreeably clanging midnight, and scarce had the final jangling note died away than my own church-clock, farther off still, took up the tale with its stately measured chime. I went and had another anxious look—the last of how many?—at the man upon the bed. He was still heavily sleeping. But he had drawn his arms out, and they now lay flaccidly upon the coverlid at his two sides. I saw that both hands were bandaged, as was also his forehead, and there was a great purple broken bruise upon one cheek—all evidently the result of a fall.

He cut such a helpless, hopeless figure, lying there—seemed to be no more than a heap of the muddled lees of life cast aside and left for clearing away by the scavengers at their next round—that soon I could no longer bear to look upon him. Broken-hearted, I turned away. In my rear the door had noiselessly opened. Lady Admington stood there peering in, a shaded light in her hand.

"How is he going on?" she asked.

She backed before me into the dusk of the corridor as I advanced to meet her. Not the least pitiable ingredient in these recurring tragic stews at Fairthorne Manor was the fact that, though in his normal condition

Sir Andrew was a most affectionate husband, there ever seized upon him a perfect savagery of hate towards his wife when these mad fits of drunken delirium occurred. She was never safe from him then. I stood in the doorway keeping her out of sight from the bed, the while I could myself hold watch on the sleeper.

"Well, I think. He has not roused a moment since the doctor left. And every hour of quiet that passes makes his chance better, as you know. You need not worry, dear Lady Admington. But get all the rest you can. You know what will depend on you to-morrow, and the days to come. Be content now to leave things to me."

Just as in his wild inebriate fury he reviled and would do her all the harm he could, so when the storm had passed his whole being seemed to fill to the brim with tenderness towards her, and he could not bear her out of his presence for a moment. And then, though reason would have regained her sure sway, the terrible craving for liquor would only be redoubled for days and days to come, perhaps for long weeks.

It was at those times that Lady Admington showed her true mettle. I did all I could from my side, of course. But the wife, then, was all-sufficient, supreme. Many a time I had stood by and watched her drag him inch by inch away from the very brink of what was virtually self-destruction. Though she triumphed, what she suffered in those dread, anxious times only herself knew. As I stood there looking at her, I forgot her pompous carriage and high-held, overbearing mien, and saw only the refined gold and tempered steel of old English patrician womanhood that lay beneath.

For the first moment then I began to make allowances for her in the recent fracas with Valerie Thrapp.

"Try not to think hardly of—of anyone, Lady

Admington," I ventured. "The girl is so capable and so wise in all sorts of ways that it is easy to forget how young she really is. I am sure she never once thought of the risk to us all that lay in what she did.

Lady Admington was long in replying.

"Nothing, nothing matters!" she broke out at last, "I care for nothing at all now, if only he can pull through. If only he can be spared, and given another chance. But the doctor—you remember what he told us last time? Oh, it will be too terrible if—if he goes like—like this!"

With a sob she turned from me. I watched the glimmer of her lamp until it vanished round the distant bend in the corridor. I turned myself then with something like the same sound involuntarily coming from my own throat, and went to take up once more my lonely watch within the room.

I heard one o'clock strike—two—three—four. At every hour she came back, and silently opening the door, stood there expectantly, just out of sight of the bed, for the news I should bring her. So constantly did she appear at the moment when the last chime of each hour ceased, that I was generally at the door waiting a little before her.

"Still sleeping, and his breath hardly so laboured," was one of my earliest words at these meetings. "But you are not giving yourself a chance, Lady Admington. Do try and get some sleep on your own account."

"I have been dozing," she returned, with a half-smile, "quite a lot—in the chair. But I must come. I know you understand."

The dim spot of light journeyed away at that like a moth on the ceiling. I went back to my own chair to take up the tale of dragging minutes again.

"Still sound asleep. He has not moved an eyelash,"

was my next word to her later by an hour. "And the breath is undoubtedly easier and more regular."

"Thank God!" she said, and patiently turned away.

Alone again in the dim room, my first act was to take up the great comfortable arm-chair and stagger away with it into the farthermost corner. It was too tempting, too risky, to have it so near. I walked for a solid hour then without a break, and must have covered miles. The last few yards of the journey were made in the direction of the now gently opening door, my stride fantastically set into time with the strokes of the distant church-clock.

"Better!—without a shadow of a shade of a doubt! The breathing nothing like so quick nor so heavy. And I almost fancy——"

"Oh, what? what?" she cried, as I stopped. I left her a moment to bend a searching look at the face on the pillow. "Yes, I am sure! The normal colour is returning, and the features have almost lost their tremor and movement. Yes, if only we can get through the next few hours!"

"God be praised! God be praised!" Over and over again she said it. The sound of her voice only died away with the far-off failing glimmer of the lamp.

When she came again, she found me standing in the open doorway eagerly waiting for her.

"Dear Lady Admington, I really and truly believe—Yes, there is no doubt! He is rousing at last—he has been only half-asleep now for some time. But all the bad symptoms have passed away. We can begin to hope now with all our might."

Always, as I spoke, keeping vigilant eye on the bed within the room, I now saw one of the gaunt white arms slowly lift, then fall, then as slowly lift again. I was at the bedside in a moment. Both arms were now

upstretched, wavering about in the wan half-light of the breaking day as though seeking to clasp something. The eyes remained fast closed, but the lips began to move, and I bent to listen.

"Sophie! . . . Where is she? . . . My—my darling! My—my darling—wife!"

In an instant I was back at the door.

"The crisis is past! He is safe, safe! It is your name, dear Lady Admington, he is calling! Be of good cheer, dear heart: there is nothing more to fear!"

As I uttered the joyful words, she sank upon her knees, pressed her two hands over her eyes, leant her head against the wall.

"Oh, I am so thankful, so thankful, so thankful!" Faintly, brokenly, the words came up to me again and again. I bent to her.

"Times of thankfulness," said I, "should be always times of forgiveness. Go to her bedside now, Lady Admington. Wake her, let her first consciousness tell her all is well again between her and you. And then come straight back here for what we are going to do together."

With that I left the crouching figure, and sped back into the room.

Silently, and with intentional deliberateness, I made my preparations for the service of the Holy Communion. Sir Andrew had fully roused now, and was lying with his head raised upon his arms, his haggard eyes following my every movement. Not a word passed between us. I lighted the candles on the little altar, set in their places the cruets of water and wine and the silver pyx of bread. I remember how rich a sparkle the lights made under the wan, white radiance of the broadening day, and what a ghastly pallor it

all lent to the rigid face upon the bed. I put on my surplice and green stole, and, still without word or direct look at Sir Andrew, quietly knelt down before the altar and began the service for the private administration of the rite.

As I read on, I heard the door softly open and close behind me, and knew that Lady Admington had returned. Though I did not look round, I felt rather than heard that she crossed to the bedside and was received in the way I longed and hoped for. And when I turned at length at the beautiful 'Invitation,' I saw, to my infinite joy and relief, that the best had come to pass. As she knelt by his side he had one of her hands fast in his two shaking swathed hands. He was sobbing and weeping like a child.

And thus a little later I left them, she holding his head upon her breast, and he still sobbing—like loving mother and shamed, repentant child. I crept home to my bed through the first level rays of autumn sunshine, tired out to the last notch, yet thanking and praising God.

CHAPTER VIII

A SPECIMEN DAY IN FAIRTHORNE

THE weeks that followed were busy weeks for Linda and me. Every day from morning to night we were out and about together visiting in the parish, steadily working our way from house to house; and as I watched the tints of autumn slowly warming the landscape round the village, so I watched a warmth of kindness for my dear Sunset Bride gradually overspreading the little world of Fairthorne hearts.

In the early days, on first arriving at a cottage door, I was for putting her behind me, getting my own greetings over in the outset, and then bringing her to the front with some sort of formal introduction. But, from the very beginnng, Linda would have none of this. As a door opened to my knock, I had hardly got out a word when she was before me. Let this stand as a specimen of these first days we worked together.

"May we come in, Mrs. Ayling?"—of course every time I had carefully primed her in advance with the right name and a brief synopsis of the family history. "What a cosy little room! And may we sit down just for a minute? I have been wanting so to come and see you. I have heard so much of you from my husband. And here we are at last, aren't we? Oh, what a sweet little boy!"

The grubby infant on the hearth-rug playing with a headless wooden horse, sat up staring blankly at the smiling lady who was now on her knees before him holding out a pretty slender hand. I expected a terrified outburst, but was agreeably disappointed. A minute later, there we all were, comfortably seated round the room—Mrs. Ayling, Mr. Joe Ayling, the Sunday bell-ringer and weekday chimney-sweep, fetched in from the back premises with clean but very damp and clammy hands, myself heroically roasting in the place of honour in the chimney-corner, and Linda adroitly self-placed near the open window with Charlie contentedly giggling on her lap.

"Now we are going to see one of my real special little families," I said to Linda, as presently we were voyaging down the street intent on our next visit. "The name is Bunkle. He is woodman, vermin-trapper, covert-beater, and half-a-dozen other things besides, and is away from home a lot at his work, sometimes for weeks on end. I expect he is away now. But she—— Well, you shall judge for yourself. There is the house."

We had threaded our way down a narrow side-street, and come out upon the green, sunny purlieus of the village. The Bunkles' cottage stood at the corner in its own plot of well-ordered garden-ground. We went up the red-tiled path to the door between barricades of red and yellow chrysanthemums, with trim rows of startlingly green cabbages and suchlike beyond. The door of the house stood open. A cat dozed on the white doorstep in company with a milk-jug. All was quiet within, save the low sound of a woman's voice humming an old song somewhere in the rear, and an occasional dull thud with whose origin I was long familiar.

"No," said I, as I raised hesitating knuckles to the door. "Steve is still away evidently, or things would have a much brisker air. Shall we go in, or try somewhere else? I think it is her ironing day."

But before we could retreat, Mrs. Bunkle had discovered our presence. She came charging out of the back kitchen, delighted welcome to the pair of us beaming in her wholesome face. Mrs. Bunkle was one of the few women still left of the old-fashioned sort who could curtsey, and she did it now to Linda, dropping her the sweetest, quaintest little obedience that had in it no trace of any concession to feudalism. She soon had us enthroned in the two best chairs in the tiny parlour crowded with all sorts of early-Victorian nicknacks, the most weirdly useless china ornaments and bead-mats, gaudy waxen-flowers and fruit under glass shades footed in red chenille, and the walls loaded with cases of stuffed birds trimmed round with family photographs framed in crimson plush.

"Any minute now," said Mrs. Bunkle, in answer to my query as to the possible date of her husband's return. "I've been listening for the sound o' him all the morning, though there'll be never a doubt when 'a be coming, as ye know. Dear, dear! what a racket they do allers make a'tween 'em!"—'they' being Steve and his little pack of mongrel terriers and spaniels necessary in his various crafts.

As she rattled on to me, Linda's glance was straying to the many portraits on the walls.

"Who is this fine looking soldier?" Linda asked.

"Oh, him? 'Tis Bert, my oldest. Out in India, 'twill be three year come Christmas. And this'n be George as works up at t'farm. And there be poor Mary as died, and 'Enery and Ern alongside o' her. That'n? Ah! 'tis trew, ma'am. 'A be a handsome gell, foreby

her mother says it. 'Tis Hetty, as is in service over in Marshminster."

"Why, how many children have you got then, Mrs. Bunkle?" broke in Linda, genuinely surprised. "You look much too young for such a large family."

It was no empty compliment. Standing there—Mrs. Bunkle could not be induced to sit down in the presence of the parson and his lady—without a sign of grey in her dark hair, and her eyes clear and bright as a girl's, Mrs. Bunkle looked much nearer forty than the fifty-five to which she pridefully owned.

"'Tis the Sussex hair, ma'am," she returned, her full hearty face wrinkling all over with mirth. "And Steve—you jest wait till ye sees him. Him and the boys; many's the time they ha' been took for brothers together. Ay! 'tis the hair—that and plenty o' hard work, as keeps men and women young i' this bit o' Gorramighty's real country. Ye've only to look at th' Reverend there."

Linda did look at me then with such comically appraising eyes that I laughed outright. Mrs. Bunkle laughed. We all laughed together, not exactly knowing why—it was the air, I suppose. And at that moment a sound was suddenly borne in upon us on the western breeze. We fell mute to listen, all three.

"'Tis Steve!" cried Mrs. Bunkle, flushing with delight like a girl who hears the voice of her lover. And all three of us made for the door.

Far away over the meadow before us, we could see the figure of a man striding along, a bundle on his back, a little crowd of scurrying dogs following at his heels. It was not what she saw, however, but what she heard, that made Linda clutch at my arm. Though not a word was distinguishable at that distance, it all sounded as if the man, as he stumped along, was giving

vent to the most horrible imprecations. Addressing himself evidently to his unruly pack, one could not, judging entirely by the angry gruffness and violence of his speech, think other than that he must be one of the foulest-mouthed ruffians alive. He seemed indeed to be poisoning the very air with profanity.

"Oh, Frank! Is he mad, or has he been drinking?" Linda whispered in my ear, at length really alarmed and stealing a commiserate glance at Mrs. Bunkle who was now down at the garden gate waving a welcome to her objurgatory spouse.

"Wait and see," said I, suppressing a grin. Linda took a firmer grip on my arm, but no longer with fear. Looking round at her, I saw an indignant steely glitter come in the grey-blue eyes. She set her small white teeth together. If things had been as they seemed with Steve Bunkle, I thought, I would rather not be in his shoes. But the true way of it was now to be revealed to Linda. The thick-set, sturdy figure in muddy gaiters and old brown velveteen coat outrageously long and baggy at the skirts, was drawing into earshot now. I felt Linda start, break away to listen intently. Then the old deep quiet laugh escaped her lips.

"Why didn't you warn me?" she cried. "Why, they are not bad words he is using at all, but——"

"Dash my blue buttons! You jest wait till I gets you home! Hi! Spotty! Botheration take ye fer a ould jammed-up deaf-post o' a blamed flea-bag—you see how I won't get round the hinder side o' ye wi' my stick directly-minute! Hi, hi! Bruiser!—come to heel, ye mangy, slip-slop ould poke o' boanes! Was your durned ould mother a hedge-pig?—stickin' up your bloomin' bristles all-ways!—ha' ye ne'er seen a turkey-burd afore? Bother my wig! was there ever sitch dorgs for scrooming around like blest bloomin' kitten-

things, to be sure an' all!"—and so on, all delivered at the top of his tremendous voice, but not a single word that could have brought a blush to the cheek of a new-born babe.

Steve Bunkle indeed was famous for his power of perfectly innocent vituperation. We could see his eager, keenly intelligent face rippling over with smiles now, as his long stride brought him ever nearer and nearer until he cast down his bundle at the garden-gate, and threw his huge brown velveteen arms round portly Mrs. Bunkle, giving her an affectionate hug and a kiss on each of her round, red cheeks. Still keeping one arm round his wife's waist, Steve Bunkle looked now towards Linda and me as he pulled off his old fur cap, letting a mass of glossy golden-yellow curls spring up all over his head like coiled wire.

"My duty to ye, sir—an' to you, ma'am! I knows who ye be—I ha' heard all about ye from mistus here. An' a welcome to ye, says I, from one and all. T'warn't afore ye wur wanted in the parish, I can tell ye. Gorm! Susie! How's the pot agoin'? Fair clemmed wi' hunger I be!"

"What a beautiful, beautiful face!" said Linda, as a few minutes later we were trudging off together on our next social errand. "I can't make up my mind whether he looks most like a golden eagle, with his yellow hair and great beak of a nose and piercing eyes, or whether he should not stand to a great impressionist painter for a picture of John Baptist quelling the wolves of the wilderness on a stormy night. Happy Mrs. Bunkle! Where are we going to next?"

We kept on steadily at our task until the sun began to lower and the afternoon to take on a deep amber tinge. We came out at length at the far end of the village where the street dipped suddenly towards the

river, and where the cottages were of the poorer kind huddling together right down to the misty water's brink.

"One more," said I, "and then homeward—we have done pretty well enough for to-day. But we ought to look in here just for a minute; that is if——"

I stopped to regard Linda rather anxiously.

"Perhaps we had better not, though. What a brute I am for forgetting. You must be tired out."

"Tired, Frank? Not in the least. I am having the happiest day of my life. Which is the house you were thinking of? Is it another of your pet families? I like the pets."

I led her down the narrow and rather dank and dirty lane.

"Well, no. Not by any means. But I often go there because—in spite of—— Linda, you shall see for yourself, and then tell me what you think."

It was a little old crazy hovel with a sagging thatch overgrown with green moss and weeds. A dirty rag of muslin hung in the lower window by a string. At the open door stood a slatternly, but not ill-favoured young woman who looked at us with sullen suspicious eyes as we drew near. She gave me no sort of return to my greeting, or noticed Linda's friendly word.

"Is it Granny ye be arter?" said she, gazing first up and then down the street, but never once meeting our eyes. "Oh, much the same, she be. 'A won't last much longer. Ye can go up if ye likes—'tis all odds to me."

At that she drew aside carelessly to let us pass in. Up a creaking dark stair of bare boards that was more a ladder than a stair, and then into the single upper room lighted, or rather darkened, by a tiny diamond-paned window where much of the glass was missing

and replaced by wedges of newspaper or straw. There was scarce anything in the grimy room but the bed. And on the bed, sitting bolt upright in the midst of an indescribable litter of tattered blanket and old wearing apparel, was a fierce-eyed, emaciated old woman holding tight with her two bony, blue-veined hands to a chain, at the other end of which strained an equally fierce-eyed fox-terrier who bared to us inimically a mouthful of jagged glittering teeth.

" Hould your noise, Mick ! 'A wunt hurt ye, mum, not he. But 'tis comfort for me, left aloane so much as I be. Ah, poor me, poor me ! The dear Lord, 'a be so long acomin' to fetch me to glory ! Why doan't He come, Reverend ? 'Tis so long, so long ! "

I had heard that, and much more like it, so often before. Taking no sort of notice of the dog—who indeed now gave over barking and settled himself comfortably down to sleep, having done his duty according to his lights—I brought a couple of rickety chairs to the bedside, and set to work to try and comfort the old woman.

" Don't you worry, Granny ! He'll come for you sure enough as soon as He's got the beautiful place ready. In the meantime He wants you to be patient and keep up a good heart, and think of Him all the time. Will you try to do that, my dear ?—try with all your might ? Just for His sake that suffered so much for you, and for us all."

Old Granny Freedy had sunk back on her pillow, and lay there with her brows knit, her fierce eyes fastened upon mine. But as I said what I could, casting about clumsily enough for any words that might possibly reach her in her wretched state, I saw the old wrinkled face turn away towards Linda and then wonderfully soften and light up.

"Who be ye?" she asked, as Linda returned her look with a tenfold kindness. "To be sure—th' new Rectory lady, as I ha' heerd so much talk about." She stopped to take another long scrutinising survey of my wife. "Well: I likes the shim o' ye, that I do Bean't afeared o' poor folk's houses like the rest o' the fine-feathered burds, or ye wouldn't be here along o' the Reverend, would ye? Gie me your hand."

Linda took the lean, shaking hand that was held out to her, and kept it between her own two comely ones as she bent over the old woman, regardless of her drt and worse. Her sweet, quiet voice stemmed out upon the dim air of the room like a beam of sunshine.

"Now I've found you out, Granny, I mean often to come and see you, if you will let me. Shall I bring my sewing down? And then I can sit and work by your side, and we can talk about all sorts of things. I shall love to. I am waiting too, you know. We are all waiting, aren't we?—only some of us may have longer to wait than others. But we never know, do we? We must just leave it in His hands, and be ready for Him when He comes."

It was too much for old Granny Freedy. She fell to weeping quietly to herself. The swimming old eyes searched Linda's face.

"Ah, ye be a good'un! Th' real sort, an' no mistake. 'Tis He has sent ye—just wi' kind looks an' a trew woman's words. Nane o' your dismal talk of blazin' fiery furnaces for poor old bodies as has tried to do their bit i' the world, but somehow gone the wrong way time an' agen. But they never comes now—none but th' Reverend here, and he only a man-critter. And will ye really come? Ah, we'll see, we'll see! Like as not, when ye have heerd a little more——"

"But I promise, Granny. You trust me, don't

you? And what could anyone say about you that could make me break my word?"

Granny Freedy was silent a while, slowly shaking her old white head. She looked round at me sharply, then back to Linda.

"Doan't ye believe naun they say, dearie. Nell, 'a be a good gell—a good gell, I tell 'ee: none better, fine clothes or no fine clothes. Good as gold, 'a be. Doan't ye go for to listen to them as speaks her ill. We'd have been i' the labourin' house, the pair o' us, long since, if twarn't for Nell, the Lord bless her! So doan't 'ee give no ear to they."

"I'll believe what you tell me, and nothing else. But why——" Linda hesitated. She looked round the room and at the appalling state of the bed. "But why—— Oh, Granny, dear! if Nell is a good girl, as you say, why does she not make you a little more comfortable, and—and——"

Cleaner, she was evidently steeling herself to say. But the old woman caught her up. Something of her former fierce-eyed resentment returned to her.

"'A be good, I tell 'ee! As good a gell as ever trod. Shouldn't I know, as has had the bringing-up o' her? Good as golden guineas! Where 'ud we be if Nell didn't work hard for the two of us? Day and night 'a be at it, as th' Reverend here well knows. But they fine-feathered popingers, wi' their eyes turned white side out, an' their talk o' lakes o' burnin' fire! Ah! I ha' no patience! Let 'em bide hoame, I says if they warnts to, 'long as they keeps their wicked tongues from wagging about poor folk's affairs."

At that old Granny Freedy fell into an angry storm of tears. A little later we left her, Linda with reiterated promise of return on the morrow. As we walked up the lane together towards home in the

deepening light of evening, we were both very silent.

"What is the matter there?" asked Linda at length, coming to a sudden dead stop in the road.

"The matter?" said I, in a quandary at the word. I looked at the sweet, pure face before me, transfixed for the moment at the mystery of the difference between one woman and another in the world. "Matter? Oh, my dear! Didn't you guess? Couldn't you understand? It is at the bottom of everything—the way people shun them, and all that. The girl—— Of course there is nothing certain, nothing proven, you know. But at least it is all a delusion of the old woman's about her working. She does very little, and is always away, they tell me, sometimes till late at night at Stavisham, and is constantly seen hanging round the barracks there. The old sordid tale, I am afraid; the only thing one woman will never forgive another for. I have spoken to the girl, but——"

"Oh, poor, poor Nell!" I stared at Linda in amazement. "Oh, poor dear girl! No wonder she hates them all! No wonder the house is dirty. It isn't blame and pious cold advice she needs, but love. And she shall have it!"

Linda stopped, her face grown rigidly white. Her breath shrilled in through her set teeth.

"Frank!"

"Yes, yes! I know, but——"

"Frank, leave this house to me, entirely to me. I will soon make a change there. Steve Bunkle was right—I haven't come before I was wanted. You shall see. Oh, poor, poor suffering, wretched Nell! Hating everyone, and herself most of all. Oh, I know, I know! Come, let us hurry home, or we shall be late."

"Late for what?" I asked, keeping up by her side

with not a little difficulty. And then came the first and last hard word I ever had from her. How well I remember it!

"Such a beautiful book, a miracle of learning, being written at the Rectory—years of labour and devotion given to its making. And this tragedy going on at your very door! Frank, for shame!"

I kept on at her side in silence until we came into sight of our home.

"But where is the need for hurrying so?" I asked her very gently.

She sought my hand and kept it in her own as we passed into the house together. That was to tell me she was not really angry.

"It's lucky there is one of us with a memory," she said, laughing now. "Isn't it Mrs. Marks' At Home day? And didn't we promise to go this week? We can just change and be up there to time, if we take the short cut across the fields."

CHAPTER IX

TEA AND TALK AT THE FARM

THE farm-house lay along towards the wooded river-side, a short half-mile westward of the village. Linda had not miscalculated. We arrived in the nick of time—just as the tea-urn was being carried across the stone-flagged hall to the drawing-room, and we followed hard in its steaming, bubbling wake.

As the door was thrown open, a babel of voices and laughter met us like water through a breaking dam. Looking over Linda's head, as we entered, I perceived a numerous company gathered round the softly lighted room. Portly Mrs. Marks at a side-table behind a barricade of silver tea-pots and china-ware. Old Ephraim Marks on the hearth-rug—a tall, broad-shouldered, stooping old man with a mahogany face and a startlingly white bald head. A dozen perhaps of the Fairthorne 'quality,' mostly feminine. In addition to these I at once made out the Gargoyle Man in a corner wedged in between the miller's lady, Mrs. Barcreech, and little Harriet Lisle. Young Markses, youth and maiden in plenty, congregated round the piano; and, in their midst, sitting on the music-stool twirling himself from side to side, a large, pale, fleshy young man somewhat overdressed, whom I knew only

distantly—Ferriday, the Stavisham lawyer and clerk to the Justices of the Peace. All these I took in with one swift survey as we made our entry into the crowded room.

And then a curious thing happened. On perceiving who it was had come in, the whole company fell suddenly mute. In a strained silence we advanced to greet our hostess, every face in the room turned in our direction and bearing the same cryptic expression—a sort of dissolving view of departing amusement and arriving embarrassment. In the very act of shaking hands with Mrs. Marks, I saw Linda hesitate and look round the room, not a little taken aback by this reception. Old Ephraim Marks laughed outright.

"Talk o' the angels!" he cried, coming off the hearth rug with a jovial lurch, both hospitable hands outstretched. "How are ye, Rector? My sarvice to ye, Mrs. Benison! Sit ye down, both o' ye, and make yourselves comfortable like. All glad as glad to see ye, we be. Here, Eliza, ring for the Rector's big cup."

In the little stir and confusion that followed, of supplying us and getting us settled in our chairs, the company slowly recovered itself. Conversation picked up again here and there in the room. Garth called across to me from his corner, evidently with the intention of helping to dispel what remained of the recent tense atmosphere.

"But you must not flatter yourself, Rector, that we were talking about you. You are rather extinguished for the moment, I can tell you. At present all eyes in Fairthorne are upon your wonderful wife. We have done nothing but sing her praises for the last quarter of an hour."

"Oh, Mr. Garth! Not sing! The very idea!"

Mrs. Marks' round blue eyes opened wide in her round

blank florid face as she looked across at the Gargoyle Man obviously a little scandalised at the notion. I saw a glint of secret mirth at Mrs. Marks' simplicity travel the circle of the room.

"'Tis only a way of speaking, mother. Mr. Garth just means we've been saying nice things about Mrs. Benison. And no wonder, I'm sure. So real haffable to everybody! One 'ud never think as she'd been a school-teacher in the place where she come from, would ye now, reely?"

Miss Eliza Marks beamed across at me, evidently rather pluming herself on the delicacy and adroitness of this tribute to my wife's qualities. The willowy lady sitting next to her, cased in a sort of curtain-stuff of sad green with headgear to match, set her cup in its saucer with a splash of hearty concurrence.

"No, indeed!" said she, turning to look at the quietly smiling Linda. "Not in the least, to be sure! Never a bit! And, Lor! Lizzie, how we did crack on soon as we heard the news o' her coming; wondering what ye'd be like, Mrs. Benison, high or low. And how ye'd get on with the Odlings up at the Rectory. And whether poor Miss Jane Lisle and you would manage to hit it off together—our Czar of Rooshia, as we call her. Ay, and all they up at the Manor! But everything's turned out fine as fine, though, to be sure, poor Valerie Thrapp, her nose be regular put out o' joint."

"Oh dear, dear!"

We all looked at Mrs. Marks. She was sitting up in her chair, horror and commiseration alike depicted on her kind face.

"Oh, poor Valerie! When did it happen, Mrs. Stubsey? A fall from her horse, was it? or summat? And I never hearing a word! I must send up i' the morning, and——"

Two of her younger daughters had simultaneously sprung upon her, hugging their mother affectionately, but exchanging little detonations of laughter over her head.

"Oh no, mother! Miss Thrapp's all right. Mrs. Stubsey only means as there'll be nothing much for her to do in the parish now that Mrs. Benison is here. Ha, ha, ha! Darling mother, you are so funny! Ha, ha, ha!"

Mrs. Marks very gently disengaged herself from the young women's embraces. She went on with her work of pouring out the tea, smiling pensively.

"Well, well, my dears! I suppose I'm old-fashioned and look at things different like. But *I* can't see much to laugh about i' that. Poor Miss Thrapp!—her nose out o' j'int! And such a handsome young lady too. 'Tis no laughing matter for her, at any rate, whatever you all think. Ah, well-a-day!"

At this the tittering affection of the two girls bade fair to be renewed. But here the old farmer intervened.

"Let bide, Lizzie! Leave your mother be, Kate!"

Stern and sharp his voice rang out, stilling for the moment the general buzz of talk. Ordinarily one of the kindliest of men and best of fathers, there was nevertheless this one thing that always nettled Ephraim Marks—any, even the slightest, animadversion on his wife's quaint literality of outlook, which was one of the traditional sources of merriment in the parish.

Lizzie and Kate wilted before his eye. And then, observing that he had rather damped the general bonhomie, farmer Marks cast about for anything that would set the talk going again. His glance fell on the Stavisham lawyer.

"Sad thing, that, warn't it, Ferriday?" he said across the room in that loud, rich, husky voice of his,

"I mean about the poor feller as was found dead on the Down the morning arter the Horse Fair. Nothing more got to be known about un, I suppose?"

The large, fleshy young man on the music-stool stretched out his legs contemplatively. For a moment or two he was silent, staring at his toes.

"Why, yes," said he with deliberation at last, "there is. We have found out the name, for one thing: at least we think so. And for another"—he stopped to look round the room—"for another thing, something that will interest you all, we have found—a child."

At the word, all pricked up their ears. Mr. Ferriday paused again, and again his glance slowly made the circle of the room, everywhere meeting keenly curious eyes. He evidently was the kind of man who loved a sensation. He seemed to wait till he judged our interest had reached a culminating point. And then he went on more deliberately than ever.

"Yes, a child. A boy, perhaps four or five years old. The dead man's, we think, because there is a considerable likeness. And if our surmise is correct, then we know the man's name, by the markings on the child's linen."

By that time the whole room was agape with curiosity. Of course the story of the gruesome discovery on the Downs about half-way between here and Stavisham was nothing new to any of us. It had been a nine-days-wonder on that countryside, but now had disappeared from the common talk and was already fast fading from everyone's mind, relegated to the limbo of unexplainable mysteries. But here was the whole thing unexpectedly and dramatically revived. A volley of questions and commentaries was hurled at the exasperatingly deliberate, placid man gently

swaying himself from side to side on the stool the while secretly enjoying our impatience.

"What was the name, Mr. Ferriday?"

"Was it a double murder, then?"

"Why wasn't the poor child found afore, wi' all the countryside out looking?"

"Dear, dear! And to think o' the little one lying out there could and dead all this long time! 'Tis a real crying shame!"

"Ah, how terrible! I never did hear the like! But do tell us the name, Mr. Ferriday."

The lawyer was waving both hands in the air in an attempt to get a hearing.

"No, no. You are all on the wrong track," said he, as soon as quiet was restored. "The child is not dead at all. He is very much alive and quite well. And he was not found hereabouts, but ten miles away in Marshminster. And as for murders—Don't you get the papers out here? Didn't any of you read the account of the inquest in last week's Stavisham Chronicle? What about the doctor's evidence?—come now!"

"The doctor was very likely wrong, Mr. Ferriday."

It was young Edward Marks, the eldest son of the house, who spoke, and everyone turned at the sound of the quiet, serious voice at the far end of the room. He had come in late from his work on the farm, and few had marked his entry, I among the number. The lawyer shook his head with, I thought, a trace of professional contempt that might have been better concealed.

"A technical point, my friend—something neither you nor I are competent to give an opinion on. Of course everyone thought at first it was a clear case of murder. A man found lying dead on the path in one of the loneliest parts of the Downs! Lying on his face with a terrible wound on the back of his head

which could not possibly be self-inflicted—there was only one apparent way of accounting for it. But then comes the evidence of the medical man to upset the whole idea. The wound, says he, would be quite sufficient to bring about instantaneous death. To all appearances the injury was the result of a very heavy blow from some blunt instrument dealt from behind. And yet it could not have been the cause of the man's death for the simple reason that he must have been dead already. I am positive, says the doctor, from indications revealed by the post-mortem, that the man died of heart-disease a considerable time, some hours at least, before he received the blow. Now then, my friend!"

Mr. Ferriday leant back, cuddling one fat knee, and looking at Edward Marks with the air of a man who has just met his opponent with an absolute facer. Edward countered the look steadily.

"But why should anyone trouble to break the skull of a dead man?" he asked. "The idea is simple nonsense. And, after all, is it certain that a doctor can tell, as this one claimed to do?—even the best and most skilful of them? If the motive were robbery——"

"Robbery of what?" broke in the lawyer. "Don't you know that money was found on the body, quite a lot for a man so shabbily dressed and obviously poor as a church mouse? How he came by it nobody knows. But you don't mean to tell me, Edward, that if someone had knocked the man down intending afterwards to rob him, he would have left the cash untouched? Oh, it's merely preposterous! That's simple nonsense, if you like."

Here the Gargoyle Man, who had been quietly listening from his corner, put in a word.

"You said just now, sir, or rather you implied," he remarked, "that no means existed of establishing the man's identity until, ten miles off, and more than a week after, a child had been found with a name marked on its clothing. May I ask how you connect the man with the child?"

Mr. Ferriday turned to look at the speaker. His scrutiny of Garth obviously told him that here he had someone of very different fibre to deal with than the gentle, serious Edward Marks. His tone changed.

"Why, sir, the simplest thing in the world," said he. "Here is a man found dead near one town, with not a scrap of paper nor anything else upon him to establish his identity. And here, the day before, in another town ten miles off, is a strange man with a little boy making his appearance no one knows from where, and putting up at the cheapest of the common lodging-houses in the place. Next morning he tells the proprietress he has a visit to pay some distance off, and asks her if she will take care of the child for him until he returns in the evening. But he does not return in the evening. Nor the next day. Nor the day after. And so on for a week, when the old woman communicates with the police. The rest you can guess for yourself."

"And have you any objection to telling us what name it was that was upon the child's clothing?" asked Garth, a question which drew a murmur of impatient approval from all in the room.

The lawyer hesitated. I could see that two things were contending within him—his professional caution, and that vanity of self-importance which, of all minor human foibles, has had perhaps the most influence, for better or worse, on the course of the world's affairs. He took refuge in a clumsy subterfuge.

"Well," said he, "if there were the faintest possibility of a capital charge ever being preferred in the case, I should of course have decided objection. But in the face of the medical evidence and the coroner's verdict—No, I see no reason why I should not mention the name here, privately, amongst friends. It is Jones, J-O-N-E-S. A very unusual name. Don't think I ever heard it before, have any of you?"

Mr. Ferriday sat back on delivering himself of this joke, a fat smile on his rather stupid face. The Gargoyle Man looked at him grimly, witheringly.

"And where is the child now?" he asked.

The comfortable man rounded wondering eyes at the question.

"Why, in Marshminster workhouse, of course. Where else would you think? And now let's talk of something else."

But an hour or so later, when a general dispersal of the company took place, and Linda and Harriet Lisle, with Garth and myself some way in the rear, were threading the moonlit lane back to the village, we were overtaken by a man on a bicycle. It was Mr. Ferriday. He dismounted directly he came abreast of us and began to walk by Garth's side.

"You must have thought me strange—talking to you like that," said he. "I am not sure whether you guessed the reason. You had put me in a quandary. The fact is I had to choose between risking your bad opinion and saying more than I ought to have said. I owe you an apology. But a sudden fright seized me that I had already overstripped prudence, and——"

He stopped, slackening his pace so as to allow the ladies to draw a little farther ahead.

"The truth is," he went on, "we are trying to

disabuse the public mind of the whole idea of foul play in this affair as giving us our best chance of getting to the bottom of the mystery: for mystery it is, and perhaps crime. Of course Jones is not the real name. You knew that. And of course money is not the only thing murders are committed for—perhaps the most unlikely thing. Revenge is a much commoner motive, and may have been the motive in this case. And of course doctors do sometimes make mistakes; our sort of doctor in particular. But naturally we seized upon what he said about the man being dead before the wound was inflicted, as the greatest help to us in the idea we wished to get abroad, in order to put certain people unknown off their guard. I think you see the point? And you believe, then, I had no intention of offending you? That's good! Well: I must push on now. Good night!"

Garth stared silently after the retreating figure. When the glow of the bicycle lamp had vanished in the leafy fastnesses of the lane, he laughed quietly to himself.

"A babbler!" said he. "Just a talkative old wife! And that's a successful lawyer, is it? Did you mark the 'we, we' all the time? I tell you what it is, Rector; I believe the police over there know him of old, and have just told him as little of the business as they wish to get abroad. Depend upon it, there's a lot more in it than the conceited simpleton dreams of. A mystery?—of course it's a mystery. But just as surely it's a crime." He trudged along by my side for a minute or so, pulling silently at his pipe. "Why, if I weren't so infernally busy," he burst out at last in sudden anger, "I would look into the thing a little myself, if only for the sake of that poor little friendless boy they've made a workhouse brat of. And that's another crime."

CHAPTER X

THE FIRST FIRE

THE autumn night had fallen chill, with a heavy dew that put a glimmering rim of silver to everything under the moonlight. But as Linda and I passed through the Rectory gates, there was another sort of glimmer before us, the sight of which drew from Linda a little comfortable crooning sound as from a bird homing to its nest. All the windows of the house but one gave back a chequer-board pattern of reflected moonshine. But this one poured forth a dim wavering rosy light. I echoed the approving sound at my elbow.

"Trust Mrs. Odling!" said I, as we threw down our wraps in the hall and pushed into the little side-room, lighted only by the red embers of the welcome fire of seasoned oaklogs piled up on the old-fashioned hearth. "She may be a little over-ready with her tongue at times, but she never forgets your creature-comforts. What a big, beautiful glow! Now there is nothing more I could wish for in the world but just what I have got at the present moment,—a cosy room, a wood fire, supper laid and ready, work finished and out of mind for the day—nothing more to do but to sit down and enjoy the good things prepared, and—and you."

The involuntary emphasis I know I put into that

last word, brought a sudden spot of colour into each of Linda's cheeks, clearly visible even in that red radiance. Her eyes danced. She drew a quick breath. She said nothing, but came over to the hearth and stood awhile by my side, her small foot quietly tapping the fender-kerb. I stole an arm round her, and drew her to me very gently, as though she were some precious piece of porcelain that might easily break, as indeed she looked in the ruddy transforming light. Presently she put a hand to her side, laying it there upon my own clasping hand. The quick breath came again.

"Is it all real?" she said, a little quaver coming and going in her voice as she looked down into the glowing embers. "Is Ledingham Infant School really gone for good? And all the old life—the pattering feet of the little children and their sweet voices coming every morning to break for me the silence and loneliness of the old house? How I got to love the noise they made, and even their little quarrels and all the daily work and bother they brought me! Is it all at an end for ever, really? Oh, Frank, sometimes I almost think I am only in a dream, here with you as your wife, and that presently I shall wake up and find I have only been dozing, as I often did late at night when I was getting the lessons ready for the morrow—wake up with a start to find my book on the floor, and I alone as I always was, and the old church clock calling to me over the silent town that it was midnight and time for bed, even for school-mistresses. You cannot think how hard it is for me sometimes to believe what my eyes and ears show me—this wonderful happy life that has come to me at last—dropped out of the clouds, so to speak—you and I together as man and wife after all the long years! But it was so often my dream in those old days! I have sometimes wondered whether, by

dreaming and dreaming the same thing over and over again, one can make the thing at last come true! Have you ever thought of that?"

No, I never had, I told her. I too had had my besetting dream—the longing to be famous in a whole wide world, when my real vocation, as I had now been brought to see, was but to serve and love for Christ's sake in a tiny obscure corner of it. Why were these memories of her old lonely humdrum life coming back to her now, I thought, when I had hoped they had already faded away into a mere far-off nothing?

"Linda! Dear, dear wife!" I said to her, when I had conned this over a little. "Is there anything, *anything* that I have not done, but still can do, which could make you happier than you are now? Only tell me, and it shall be done. The past I cannot get back. The wasted years are gone beyond recall. But the present is mine, to do with as I will; and if there is any single thing in the world——"

She stopped me then.

"Don't!" she said, under her breath. She turned her face away, looking back into the dimness of the room. A sudden apprehension seized me.

"You do not feel unwell?" I asked her anxiously. "I know I have been working you too hard to-day. But you must rest all to-morrow, and——"

But again she stopped me, with the same word even more softly uttered. The pressure of her hand on mine increased.

"There is nothing," she said. "I have you. My dream has come true. Every day and every hour of my life I thank God for that, and ask him to show me how I can, in ever so little, prove to Him my thankfulness. Only—only—— Oh, Frank, I am so old!—old, at least, for a woman. And when a woman loves a man,

there is one way above all others she—she longs for in which to express her love, and—and—— And now I shall never——"

The words died away in a little storm of angry, hopeless tears, irrepressible though she strove against it, I knew, with all her might. But in a moment she had conquered it. Gently she disengaged herself from my arm. She went to the window and stood there a moment looking out upon the silvery night. And then, as I stood staring helplessly after her, a knock sounded on the door. Mrs. Odling came in bearing steaming covers upon a tray. She busied herself setting these out on the table, glancing curiously from one to the other of us the while. Linda turned. She broke into her old merry laugh.

"No! We have not been quarrelling, Mrs. Odling! Though it looks rather like it, doesn't it? Oh, what a lovely hot-pot! And broccoli like piled-up snow! Come along, Frank, or you will be getting into Mrs. Odling's bad graces again, just as you told me you often did, you know, before I came."

Mrs. Odling stood awhile watching us eat, a quizzical, rather minatory smile on her strong old face, her hands clasped in front of her under her big white apron. In the old days of my bachelorhood, it had been her custom to remain in the room during supper-time, ostensibly to serve me, but really for the talk she loved so well. We had always exchanged items of village-news then, and discussed parish affairs generally. To-night, obviously, she had something special on her mind; and a little later out it came, though it was not of the nature I expected. She fixed me with a stern eye over Linda's head.

"Wood—and stone—and iron—and such-like," she remarked, letting the words out through her compressed

lips in little, portentous jerks, " they can't be made useful wi'out hammering and wearing down. But human flesh and blood. Ah! 'tis not my words, Rector, 'tis Willim's, his very own. Ye allers minds Willim when 'a says a thing. And I said to him, ' Willim,' I says, ' the very next chance as I gets to speak to the Rector, I'll gi'e him your very words as you ha' jest spoke—straight to his head,' I says. And there it be. Small good 'ull come on't, though, like as not. Times gone, Rector, 'twur like drawing teeth, to get ye out o' the study or away from the garden a moment, just to see a body. But these times ye be traipsing about the parish from morning to night all day and every day, and her arter ye—— But human flesh and blood, I tell 'ee, particular when 'tis fine-brought-up ladies' flesh and blood——"

By that time we had both got, or thought we had got, a drift of Mrs. Odling's meaning. As far as she and her husband were concerned, my own recent resolves and Linda's arrival had indeed between them worked a revolution in life at Fairthorne Rectory. I was leaving the bees and poultry and vegetable plot, on which so much of our joint living depended, almost entirely to Odling now. Nor did I any longer rely on Mrs. Odling for the carrying out in my name of countless little commissions and odd services among the very poor of the parish, which hitherto had been her special and, of a truth, unenvied task. Linda had naturally and almost of necessity begun to take over this exacting and often unsavoury work. She had done so as innocent of suspicion of giving umbrage to the old woman as I of hurting Willim's feelings by withholding my daily presence from what we grandly called the ' Farm.' I cast a troubled look across the table at my wife. But as usual she was ready for the occasion.

"It is only the new broom sweeping clean, Mrs. Odling," said she, gentle propitiation in her voice and eyes. "I was so anxious to begin by getting a general bird's-eye view of everything before settling down in earnest to my little share of the work. It wasn't the Rector's fault; he could not help himself. But after to-day I am going to leave him pretty much to his own part, the church services and men's and boys' clubs and things; and you and I——Oh, but I am going to insist on that! I can't really get on without you, Mrs. Odling dear. You know every soul in the place and all about them. I shall be lost unless you work with me. Every day now, when you can spare the time, we must be out and about together——"

I put in a diplomatic word here.

"You must get Mrs. Odling to show you that wonderful book of hers, Linda," I said. "Her record, you know, of all she does and the circumstances of each case. Have you got it with you, Mrs. Odling?"

Mrs. Odling took no notice of my interruption. She looked at Linda thoughtfully for a moment or two, evidently considering her words.

"Ah well," said she at last, her brow clearing, "that'll do, I reckon. As Willim says, you wants somebody with you as 'ull take care you doan't pull more'n your weight, and that I'll see to now, you may lay your life. You shall ha' the book, dearie, along o' the coffee d'rectly-whiles."

And half an hour later, when I had pulled the two great easy chairs up to the fire, I got Linda comfortably nested in one of them, with Mrs. Odling's stuggy, dog-eared little pocket-book open in her lap. Sitting opposite to her with my pipe drawing well and a pile of treasured Bamptons ready to my hand in case the mood came over me for reading, I soon found I was

too happy that night for anything but to loll back in the chair and watch my wife as she slowly turned over the leaves of the book.

In her sweet intent face I was glad to see now no trace of the trouble that had so suddenly swept over it an hour before, like a midsummer storm. For a long while she kept silence, serenely absorbed in Mrs. Odling's quaint chronicle, extending over many years, as to innumerable people's woes and endless donations of soup and liniment, pats of butter and cod-liver oil, cough-mixture, loaves of bread and quarts of milk, blankets and penny New Testaments, articles of clothing, and vouchers for the free attendance of the parish midwife. Every item was carefully costed and the amounts added up and carried forward from page to page, the grand total being ruled off at the end of each month. At length Linda closed the book and laid it thoughtfully down. Her brows knitted a little.

"And who pays for all this, Frank?" she asked.

"Oh, there is the 'Sick and Poor Fund' and the Alms Box. And we have a collection in church for it every now and then. And the Admingtons—they can always be relied on for help when it is specially wanted. And—and—the cough-mixture and liniment and things cost very little because Mrs. Odling makes them herself—she's a rare good hand at home-doctoring. Of course I have to put my hand in my pocket like the rest, but one way or another we manage very well, you know."

Linda seemed to consider this point rather doubtfully.

"And the living is worth—how much? Two hundred and forty pounds all told?"

"Fully that, my dear. And the Farm brings in quite a lot; another hundred at least in good years. Oh, we contrive to pay our way all right, though of course sometimes——"

She had turned upon me such a radiant look of love and trust, withal mingled so oddly with a gleam of secret merriment, that I stopped, feeling I had been rather caught out about something I could not quite locate.

"I see," she said, the laughter still in her dear true eyes. "Well. Mrs. Odling must be a perfect genius for management. And that's another thing I shall have to learn from her. But—unselfishness first."

"What!"

"Yes, unselfishness. And fine susceptibility. Frank, we were both stupidly wrong about her just now. We thought she was speaking merely out of a little jealousy, a feeling that she had been supplanted. But it was not so. It was just real genuine fear that I was doing too much for my strength. And see how sweetly she took our blundering attempts to propitiate her—all the more shame to us. Oh, Mrs. Odling is a gem! I am going to get very fond of her, I can see, before many months are over."

She laid the book down in her lap, and sat a while with her eyes on the fire. Presently she began to speak again, as though musing to herself.

"A noble, happy life of service," said she. "And all this left to her alone—no help from anyone. And so many other willing hands in the parish, each doing something or other; with splendid Miss Lisle on her sofa, like a dying general in his chariot, egging them all on! What kept them at it? Ah, I am beginning to learn! How lucky you have been, Frank! All these childless women—they had to have some vent for their love and energy. The two Lisles and the rest, and above all Mrs. Odling——"

"Not Mrs. Odling!" I interrupted. "Childless?—why, she has had quite a large family of her own:

six or seven sons and daughters. But some are dead, and the others all married and scattered over the face of the earth. There is not one, I think——"

"She has lost them all then, one way or another: just as I have lost mine! Ah, it comes to the same thing, Frank. The object goes, but the love keeps on. And it must have something——"

We were tacking across to the old dangerous shallows again, I saw. I came and leant over the back of her chair.

"Dearie, dearie!" I said to her. "Why will you torture yourself—yes! and torture me too—with thoughts about things that cannot be helped now? What has wrecked my life in the past was not selfishness: it was blindness. I was like a blind man honestly meaning to take the road I was bid, but walking away from the glory all the time, instead of towards it, because, though I had the will, I had not the sight. Of course the blame was entirely mine. I am not seeking to get out of that. But the worst of it is I cannot pay the cost alone—you must pay it too. Yet do you not see that what grieves you, grieves me just as much? It is not only that I suffer because you suffer—it is that I have the same longing that now never can be. . . . Oh, my darling! do not let us rub salt into one another's wounds! Let us rejoice and thank God together for what we have—and it is a very great deal—and after to-night never speak of this again."

She reached up both arms and drew my lips down to hers for one lingering moment.

"Yes; you are right, Frank," she said. "We never will. I am not really the weak creature I must seem to you. You shall see, dear! forgive and forget!"

. . . . . .

But in the night, hours after all the village was

silent and the moon getting low, I awoke—a thing rare for me; woke not suddenly but by easy stages, coming, as it were, rung by rung down a ladder of dreams to the solid ground of living things again. A gentle hand lay on my shoulder. Linda had raised herself high upon her pillow at my side. Bathed in the soft moonlight, her face looked down upon me like the face of a spirit, so unearthly frail and fair and beautiful it seemed.

"Frank!" The word came down to me, on ever so light a breath. And then the voice strengthened with a glad relief. "Frank! Oh, you are awake at last, dear. I have not been to sleep at all yet. I couldn't sleep for thinking. Frank, such a lovely idea has come to me. You said, remember, that if there was anything in the world you could do to make me happier. . . . Oh, Frank, there *is* something! This poor little orphan child at Marshminster, alone in the world with nothing but a workhouse to shelter him—cannot we take him for our own child, dear? Give him to me, Frank. Let us go together and fetch him to-morrow, and give him here all he has lost, or perhaps has never had—a happy home, with people all round to love and care for him. Will you? Will you? Oh, I dreaded so to have to wait till morning before I could ask! But I know you will. You said anything, *anything* in the world."

And presently she lay in happy slumber at last, with hands clasped upon her breast as though holding there my promise given; and I was the wakeful one, staring at the last wisp of moonlight in the corner of the ceiling, wondering whether I was really awake or only waking in a dream.

CHAPTER XI

" CHERRY "

THE train to Marshminster on the morrow was crowded with farming bipeds, and quadrupeds of the like denomination thronged the streets of the old Sussex cathedral city when we arrived.

For my own part I had as lief avoided the place on market-days. But I had not the temerity to counsel postponement of our journey to Linda, seeing how eager she was to undertake it without delay. Some sort of idea obsessed her, seemingly, that the child might be spirited away before she could get there, or that she would find a host of relations contending for its possession, or that the workhouse authorities might have become so attached to it that she would not have the heart to persist in her scheme for its adoption. She was up with the lark in the morning to urge on preparations for early breakfast—out in the stables with William Odling directly after, to inspire that deliberate soul with a sense of the need for haste in getting the pony and chaise ready to bear us to Stavisham railway-station—the train had scarce begun to slacken speed on its approach to Marshminster before she was on her feet gathering her small belongings together for the earliest possible descent.

" But remember, dear," I remonstrated as we pressed up the high-street together, now dodging a herd of stampeding bullocks, now brought to a momentary dead stop behind a solid barrier of sheep; " remember we are only going to *look* at the child, to begin with. I don't want you to be disappointed. It may not be at all the sort of child you would take to. There may be a host of unforeseen obstacles——"

At that I had to lay violent hands upon her to drag her into a doorway while a string of shaggy cart-colts pounded by. But we soon turned out of the busy way leading to the market, and got into the narrower, almost deserted side-street at the top of which we could see afar off an immense sullen block of redbrick pinnacled with chimney-pots, which I knew to be the union workhouse. Linda checked her pace and fell to tucking in a stray lock or two of silvered brown hair that had escaped her bonnet, as we went along.

" Yes; only to *look* at him to begin with, I know, Frank. Naturally that is the first thing I want to do. But it is still more important to see what results from his first look at us. Couldn't you try, dear, not to wear such a solemn, severe expression? Children are so quick to form likes and dislikes. What about me? Will I do, do you think? "

I thought that the child upon whom those frank kind eyes fell without instantly warming to their owner would be no human child but a little monster. But I did not say so. Clearly there was no hope in that direction. I rang the bell at the workhouse-gates, and after many preliminaries and delays and a lengthy interview with the master, we found ourselves following that gravely courteous official up a wide echoing stone staircase on our way to the children's ward.

I was a little breathed when we got to the top, not quite understanding why those inmates of the workhouse who possessed the shortest legs should be allotted quarters so laboriously near the skies. But my first glance into the children's ward resolved my doubts on the point. Manifestly it was to provide the little ones with all the fresh air and sunlight available between every dawn and dark. The master threw open a door at the end of a long corridor, and we stood a moment looking in on as pleasant a scene as eye could wish.

Before us appeared a long lofty room, with a row of tall windows on either side all open to the fresh sweet morning air coming over the city roof-tops straight from the blue misty lowlands lying between downs and sea. Between the windows against the ochre-tinted walls were little cots canopied with spotless white dimity. The walls were hung with innumerable framed coloured prints such as children love. Down the centre of the room flowed a broad river of red carpet islanded at intervals with tables decked with bowls of bright flowers. At the far end of the ward a fire glowed behind a griddle of polished steel, and every space of floor intervening had its gambolling, laughing children of all ages and inches, their gaily-coloured pinafores lending to the whole scene the effect of a flower-garden rocking under the caress of a summer breeze.

The master stepped in before us to confer with one of the attendants, a wholesome-faced matronly woman in white cap and apron who was wandering about the room keeping order the while she bore a pair of infants, obviously twins, one on each arm. The two, or rather the four, came over to where we waited.

" That's him, ma'am, over there in the far corner,"

said the woman, indicating the direction with a movement of her head. "Sitting in the window all alone, just as he always loves to do. Good as gold he is. But such a queer, queer child. Ah, well! 'tis along of his misfortune, no doubt, poor little mite!"

She led the way down the centre of the room until we stopped opposite the window pointed out. A little child sat there in a low wicker arm-chair with his back towards us, and the morning sun pouring down full upon his shock of fair hair, changing it into rich spun gold. As he sat, he crooned to himself in a voice low, disjointed, yet of a strange thrilling sweetness. He had his face turned up to the streaming light, and before his face his two little outspread hands wavered incessantly to and fro, as if he were playing with the bright beams—winnowing them through his fingers in time with his low slow song.

"Always like that, he is," whispered the nurse in Linda's ear. "Leastways when the sun is shining. And then away he creeps to the window, just as you see. But 'tis natural-like—poor little unfortunit! I'll call him for you, shall I? Cherry!"

The child seemed not to hear.

"Cherry dear! Here's a lady and gentleman come to see you."

And then with a start, as though waking from sleep, the child turned his face full in our direction. His eyes were wide open, and seemed to be fastened upon us. But in a moment we knew that they were sightless—without pupils—just two colourless ovals like the eyes of a marble statue, except that they gave forth a curious opalescent sheen.

"Blind! Is he blind, nurse?"

Linda whispered the words, a sort of sobbing, horrified compassion in her tone.

" No, ma'am, not quite. He can just tell light from darkness. 'Tis why he loves the sunshine so."

" Like it from birth, madam." It was the grave old master behind us whispering now. " At least so the story goes. But so little is known about the boy or his dead father——"

Neither Linda not I stayed to hear more. She had sprung forward towards the window, and I after her. Quickly she knelt down by the little wicker chair, taking the child's two hands tenderly in her own.

" Cherry ? Is that your real name, dear ? I am so glad to be with you, Cherry. Do you think you will like me by the sound of my voice ? I live in this beautiful country, dear, and I heard that you were here, so I came to see you. And this is my husband who has come with me. Oh, we both love the sunshine, Cherry, just as you do. We live in a beautiful house not far from here, and on fine days there is always sunshine somewhere in our big garden. You can follow it round all day through. Wouldn't you like to come and stop with us for a little while ?—we should so love to have you, Cherry dear ! "

At first the child had listened attentively, keeping quite still in his chair, his wide-open sightless eyes like great twin-pearls, turned in the direction of the voice. And then he had slowly withdrawn his hands from Linda's clasp, and begun to pass them enquiringly over her face, her hair, her neck, finally coming back to her two cheeks, where they hovered with a gentle stroking movement. Now I saw perplexity steal over his little round, delicately-featured face. The straight golden brows knitted.

" You are crying. Your cheeks are all wet. Has your father gone away on a long journey, like mine ?

Oh, I wish he would come back! Why has he gone so long?"

Linda and I looked at each other over the boy's fair head, exchanging astonished glances. Decidedly, the voice was the voice of one very gently born and bred. In a child so young, I had never heard such dainty refinement of tone, such effortless, clear precision of utterance, nor seen a mere baby's head poised so cavalierly over pinafored shoulders. Linda captured one of the exploring hands and put it to her lips.

"Cherry dear, nobody quite knows. But be sure your father has not forgotten you, and is quite safe, wherever he is. In the meantime he wants you to be very happy; not to worry about him at all. Do you believe that? Well then, until you hear about him, and know where he has gone, I want you to come and make your home with us—with my husband and me. He is a clergyman; you know what that is, dear? Oh, we have got all sorts of things you will love! A pony that you shall learn to ride, and a yard full of chickens and ducks that you and I will feed every morning together. And a swing in the orchard. And a cow in the meadow, and a sty full of little black pigs only just born; Cherry, think of that! You never heard such a squealing as they can make!"

Linda stopped here, not because she had exhausted her catalogue of delights, but because breath failed her momentarily. I bent to the little one, laying two of my fingers in his hand—as many as it could hold.

"Yes; we shall be so glad to have you, Cherry. And perhaps, sometimes, when you are tired of all the things at home, you and I will go out for walks together, who knows? But, Cherry! Is that your real name, my dear?"

As I spoke, the little investigating fingers had been busy with my ring, my coat-cuff; thence, venturing upward, they came to a pause curiously at my clerical collar and stock.

The boy uttered a little short disdainful laugh.

"No; not my real name. It is only what my father always calls me by. My real name is Charlie."

"Charlie? Charlie what?"

The exploring hands had passed downwards now over my waistcoat, button by button, until they came to the little gold cross that hung from my neck on its silken cord.

"She has got one too—just the same! And my father—he has one; only he wears it under his clothes, out of sight. And Nurse Mary too!"

"And you shall have one as well, Cherry dear," put in Linda. She gave her head ever so slight a shake as she looked at me.

"But what is your other name?" I blunderingly persisted, "Charlie—that is only your Christian name. What else do they call you?"

The boy was quiet a moment.

"My father," he hesitated, "my father—he made me promise not to say." His lip began to tremble. The heavy gold lashes swept down upon the two pale cheeks. Linda caught him in her arms, with an indignant glance at me.

"Never mind, darling!" she cried, "we do not want to know, if you have promised not to tell us. You are quite right not to break your word. But you will come to us, Cherry dear, won't you? You may be sure your father will be glad for you to be with people who will love and care for you while he is away."

A sudden medley of voices sounded now at the far end of the ward. The door had opened, and three

or four comfortable-looking personages had entered among whom I recognised Sir Andrew Admington. The master prepared to bustle off.

"The visiting-committee," he explained. "I must leave you now. But I will see that your application goes before the board at their next meeting, and——"

But here was the chairman of the board himself, all ripe and ready for assailment on the matter. I had no faith in applications going before boards. I left Linda to fondle Cherry back to his old equanimity, and following hard upon the heels of the master, contrived to get Sir Andrew apart for an immediate word. When I had done, he fell to stroking his chin doubtfully.

"There are any number of difficulties in the way, Rector," said he. "You know how we are all bundled up in red-tape here. If there were only the board to consider, I could probably work it all right. But we have got the Stavisham police to reckon with. And there is Ferriday——"

"Ferriday!—that owl?"

"Yes, but owls can see a long way in the dark. And don't forget he has got his face to save somehow with the justices. He has blundered enough already, and——"

"Sir Andrew; just think. Here is this little child, father dead, alone in the world as far as we know. He has been sent to a workhouse. A workhouse! What a place for a child! While here are people ready and willing to give him a good home and care for him, and be father and mother to him, from this very moment. And nothing stands in the way but red-tape. Break it, sir! For men like you, and cases like this, red-tape was made to be broken. It would be just common humanity, and no more."

Sir Andrew listened with those queer dull, dark, faithful mastiff's eyes of his fastened on mine. All at once his dilemma seemed to lighten.

"Rector," said he, "do you put this to me as something I—I could do to show thankfulness for—for——"

He stopped. I carried him over the dead-point.

"Yes; in thankfulness. We all know what it is to be helped when we are helpless. And that sort of help is only given us to give again."

One of his fellow-committeemen was plucking him by the sleeve to draw his attention to some detail in their work of scrutiny. Sir Andrew looked back at me over his shoulder as he moved away.

"All right," he said, "if it *can* be done, it shall be done within the week."

CHAPTER XII

THE FAIRY GODMOTHER

FOR the next few days there was one particular phrase pretty constantly on my lips, and I had it still more often on the tip of my tongue, as the saying goes. I said it to Linda more than once in the train on our way home from Marshminster; and again—I felt I had to, for her own sake—as she was giving Mrs. Odling a breathlessly enthusiastic account of our journey and its outcome the same evening.

"You must not count too much on all this," I warned her from my place on the other side of the fire—Mrs. Odling stood on the old deerskin hearthrug between us. "There's many a slip, you know. The very fact that it is the best conceivable arrangement for the child, and a bit of commonsense as well as human kindness, is against us. And all sorts of things may happen to baulk the plan. Relatives may turn up to claim the little one. The guardians may decline our offer with thanks—they have done just as silly things as that before now. The police may insist, for reasons of their own, on the child remaining in the charge of the public authority. That fellow Ferriday may try to stop the scheme merely to display his own local power and importance. And if we get safely past all these likely obstacles, the boy himself may refuse to

come. Have you thought of that? You say yourself it seemed as if he could not bear to part from the nurse there. Linda dear, try not to count too much on this. I cannot endure the thought of your being disappointed."

I admit here—as all my life long in my secret soul I have frankly recognised—I am but a poor judge of women. How they arrive at any determination for action at all has always passed my comprehension, seeing that their methods of reasoning, so far as I have ever been able to disentangle them, seem to consist merely of a bewildering array of non-sequiturs, interspersed with countless little excursions on red-herring trails and fatal pauses to pick up the apple.

But this much also I admit, and just as freely. The best of them—nay, neither the best nor worst, but all—invariably presage action by recklessly throwing down the entire crazy-pattern web of inconsequence so carefully constructed for their own adumbration, and do what they finally do on intuition alone. And that is why, on any main issue, they are nearly always triumphantly right, and why it has become a truism with all husbands worthy of the name that a good woman, no matter what she may think or say, can always be trusted to do infallibly for the world's common right and God's glory.

"Try not to count too much on this," I said again, as both Linda and Mrs. Odling turned sharply to look at me. "I cannot bear you to build up all these happy hopes, dear, and then perhaps, in a day or two, a beastly letter arrives from the guardians thanking me, but regretting that, under the peculiar and suspicious circumstances, etc., etc. Oh, I have had dealings before with these amateurs in philanthropy! They have such a deadly horror of creating a new precedent—putting a

new patch on their rotten old garment of the Poor Law—lest the whole thing should fall into hopeless rags. It is good to hope for the best, I know; but one ought always to prepare for the worst."

"And come down out of your pulpit, Frank," said Linda, as though she were finishing my sentence for me from her place in the Rectory pew. "And own up that you are afraid—afraid of hearing a child's pattering feet and happy voice about the old house where you tell me there have been nothing but bachelor parsons these hundred years back. But all that is going to be changed now—what say you, Mrs. Odling?"

Mrs. Odling turned back to the discarded tea-table and transferred another plate or two to her tray. She always spun out this work of clearing away the impedimenta of a meal to its utmost limit. As she moved about the table, she repeatedly looked at me. She took up the fully loaded tray at last.

"Sakes! Rector!" she cried. The heaped china-ware in her arms gave forth a furious little clatter. "Don't ye take on so! There be nothing to froughten a man. Leastways not a man as can reckamember he was once a child his own self. And foreby a little blind child as it be. He'll never run about—not any sense to irk ye. And you can have a real thick curtain put to the study door——"

"No, no! You are both taking me wrong!"

I was really hurt at such an accord of misapprehension against me. I drew a brand from the fire wherewith to light my pipe, studying the while the two faces before me. The old spots of crimson were aglow in my wife's pale cheeks—infallible sign that she was strongly moved. I looked at Mrs. Odling. Her whole visage was empurpled, and there was a tremor of the lip I could not understand until I met her happy old

eyes point-blank. And then, at long last, perception dawned on me. What a selfish dullard, what a perfect human armadillo I had been!

"Come here, both of you!" said I, penitently enough. Linda's hand eagerly locked itself in mine, and I saw her other hand steal through Mrs. Odling's grey alpaca arm despite the tray she bore. We stood awhile, all three side by side, gazing down into the fire.

"What you want, I want too," I said, "and with all my heart I hope it may come to pass. If it doesn't, I'll know the reason why, I can tell you. And I won't have the curtain, Mrs. Odling, on any account. I will never even shut my door. You shall see! But there's many a slip! Cherry isn't here yet, and it is always possible—— No! I won't talk any more like that, either. Time enough when we know our luck. We will just all hope for the best——"

"And prepare for the best too, Frank."

Linda's eyes were laughing in her grave face as I turned to her for light on that cryptic interruption. But I got none, either by word or look. Nor had I any more success with Mrs. Odling, who also presented me with a visage as secretly merry as it was mute. The two then broke away from me at a sign from my wife, and off they went together, leaving me for a good hour to smoke my pipe in solitude.

But little by little, as the days journeyed on—days, however, which brought no single word of news from Sir Andrew Admington—I began to get an inkling of something unusual pervading the old house. Linda, to all appearances, had taken a sudden fit of domesticity, and I came upon her several times clad in a huge brown holland wrap scouring through the dim old corridors of the place in company with Mrs. Odling. Then it gradually dawned on me that the little oriel chamber

next to our own bedroom, hitherto only a receptacle for useless but precious household lumber, was being turned out, as they called it—the first time, in my certain knowledge, for ten years or more.

I looked in through the open door one morning as I chanced by, attracted by a subdued yet happy hubbub of voices within. There was Willim, in a green-baize apron, up a stepladder hanging pictures; and there were Mrs. Odling and my wife, their heads tied up in handkerchiefs, busy with besoms in a cloud of dust. Then, one afternoon, instead of bearing me off hot-foot on a round of parish visits, as was our custom now six days out of every seven, Linda announced that she was driving Mrs. Odling into Stavisham that day to do a little shopping. The two went off in the pony-chaise together, and at six o'clock in the evening, when I was due at a meeting of the Allotment Gardens Committee to be holden in the miller's house at the far end of the village, the chaise had not returned, though it was long after dark. When I got back, there was Linda sitting with her workbox as usual demurely sewing, and Mrs. Odling standing over her administering advice as to herring-boning and the like in so loud a tone that I could but believe it was intended rather for my own hearing than my wife's. I was confirmed in this suspicion a little later on by perceiving, on the staircase, and in the corridor above, sundry stray wisps of straw and odd pieces of packing paper; as also by the fact that when I tried the door of the little oriel-room in passing, it proved to be locked.

The next morning, the general vague sense of something mysterious happening in the house without my being let into the secret was accentuated by the discovery I made, on returning from a long tramp over the Downs to an outlying house in my parish, of

wheel-tracks obviously made by some heavy vehicle in the soft gravel of the carriage-way between the front gates and the house. I was ruminating over these, tracing them curiously with my stick, when Linda's voice sounded from the open door hard by. There she stood on the top step in her plain stuff gown, her two arms raised above her head parting drooping vines of virginia-creeper so that she could look forth at me—her pure true face shining out madonna-like through the frame of vivid scarlet leaves. She made so ravishing a picture that I instantly forgot all about the tell-tale tracks. In a moment I had her in my arms.

"Wife Linda!" said I, "would you like to know what I have been saying this morning to that quarrelsome old couple over there at Dingle Bottom? Well, whether you would or not, I am going to tell you. All their disagreements, I assured them, were due to one thing alone—their lack of mutual confidence. And I said to them—I said this to the wife specially—I said that the great source of unhappiness in married life was for husband and wife to have secrets from each other. And then I went on to——"

Linda gently laid a hand upon my lips.

"Never mind what else you told them," she said, "It is all ready. Come and see."

I followed her into the house, and up the stair, and along the dim corridor, with its uneven flooring, until she stopped outside the oriel-room. "Now you may look—father," said she with a little sudden laugh and a catch in her voice, as she threw the door back "but it is as much as your life is worth to go in."

I did as I was bid. For a couple of silent minutes, perhaps my eyes wandered round the room, and with every second that passed my astonishment at what I beheld increased. The little place had been entirely

transformed. It was furnished throughout handsomely, almost sumptuously; everything in it obviously new, and good as money could buy A thick soft carpet covered the floor. Silken curtains hung on either side of the window and draped the little bedstead in the corner, which was of polished rosewood. A dainty chair or two, a spindle-legged table, a chest of drawers, and other necessaries of a bedroom stood here and there, made out of the same choice wood. A good clock stood on the mantel busily ticking in company of a row of pretty, expensive-looking ornaments—the clock struck the hour in a quiet, gentlemanly, deprecating tone as my astounded eyes turned that way. A rocking-horse of magnificent proportions, a Noah's-ark well on the way to life-size, boxes of bricks and other toys beloved of children—wherever I looked some new wonder gleamed up at me bright as paint and varnish could devise.

But astonishment at all these elaborate preparations soon gave way to another feeling.

"Linda, my dear girl," said I, putting my arm round her as we stood looking into this Aladdin's cave together, "but is not all this very—well, at least rather—what shall I call it?—indiscreet? Of course I have had my suspicions that something of the sort was brewing. It does not come upon me wholly as a surprise. But really—— My dear, my dear! I would not say anything to hurt you for worlds, as you must know. But—but how on earth are we to pay for all this?"

I suppose there must have been a look of something akin to horror and dismay upon my face as I put this question, for I plainly saw those feelings comically reflected in her own. Yet her eyes kept up their old merry dance, and out it all came the next moment.

"Frank," said she, laughing outright now, and

evidently enjoying in advance the effect of her words, "there is nothing for a poor parson to worry about. I have not spent a farthing of our own money on this, nor run you into any debt. Everything is paid for——" She stopped, holding up a finger. A little sweet quiet warble sounded within the room. Looking for the source of the miniature music, I now saw what I had not before noticed—a cage with a linnet in it standing in the corner of the window-seat. "Everything—even that," she said.

For a moment or two she let me welter in the bewilderment caused by her words. And then she linked her two hands over my shoulder and laid her cheek upon them.

"Frank, dear, really and truly, when I started out with Mrs. Odling the other afternoon we had no idea of buying more than two things: I some muslin for the windows—I could find nothing but rags in the store-cupboard—and she a Punch with bells on a stick, her one idea, as far as I can make out, of a gift-toy for a child. But, in Stavisham who should we meet coming down the high-street but Valerie Thrapp! And of course she wanted to know what had brought me into the town, and of course I had to tell her. I could see at once she knew all about what Sir Andrew was trying to do for us. Frank, what a hurricane of a woman she is! It is simply hopeless to resist her when she means to have her way in a thing. The moment I mentioned Cherry, and how we were preparing for the best, nothing would content her but she must have a hand in it. She rushed us into one shop after another recklessly buying things, and to all my expostulations she returned the one sort of answer, 'Oh, do let me have my own way, dear Mrs. Benison! I've two hundred a year as the Admingtons' secretary,

and nothing whatever to spend it on. Do have pity on me and let me get rid of a little of it in this perfectly delightful way.' And so she went on—there was no stopping her, though I tried my best. And here you see the result, Frank dear. And you may think yourself lucky it's only a linnet. I did make a firm stand at last, and saved you from a mongoose and a cage full of white mice."

But I was not giving much thought to the linnet, nor indeed to anything before my eyes at that present moment. My mind had gone back resistlessly to a thing I had of late been trying my hardest to forget, and with no little success. The scene with Valerie Thrapp in the little side-chapel of the church that ominous dark autumn evening, which had of late strangely receded with me into the limbo of long past events, now came flashing back into memory; particularly in respect of the words I had last used, "Valerie, you know so much, while she is wholly without any experience at all. Work with her then, teach her, help her all you can. As time goes on I believe you will see a light and a way through all difficulties. Who knows but in helping you may yourself find help?" The very words rang in my ears now as though only just uttered. And as clearly Valerie's answer came back to me: "I understand."

But that she understood a good deal better than I gave her credit for, had been proved by the line of conduct she had since steadily pursued. Though in chance meetings with both myself and my wife her bearing had been of the friendliest, she had never once come near the Rectory, nor fulfilled her promise to continue her old sacristan work for the church. In the outset, this had discomfited me. But as time went on I saw that her woman's instinct had prompted

her to a far better course than the one that I—blundering about distressed and anxious as much for myself as for her, and blindly seeking a way out of my difficulty, like a moth within a candle-shade—had seized upon at the time. I had come to believe that her way of things was the only practical way for us both, and heartily to wish and hope that matters would now fare permanently on those lines.

But what was the meaning of this mad thing she had now done? Had she discovered that the course she had adopted was one outside her power, beyond endurance for a nature such as hers? And if she had thus suddenly thrust herself back into my affairs, what would she do next? I am afraid I turned to Linda a face darkened by the perplexity of these urging thoughts, for I saw her own face cloud. She moved a little from my side.

"You believe, then, I have done wrong in allowing this?" she said in a hard, strained voice. She bit her quivering lip a moment in silence. And then the hard voice broke. "A man can never really know." The words came on the lightest breath—addressed to the air, it seemed. "It takes a woman to—— Oh, Frank, can you think I am so foolish as not to see that you were right in what you said about the chances in all this? Of course I see it as you see it. Very likely Cherry may never enter this room. It may all turn out as you say. But all the same I could not be wise as you wanted me to—only for my own sake, I well know. I had to do it, dear, if only to ease the longing which—— And it was so very little I had intended to do, Frank dear, or could afford to do. I only meant to look at the fine things in the windows of the big shops! But suddenly, down out of the clouds dropped this fairy godmother and with her magic wand touched

all my dreams and made them real. And how could I——"

A sharp rat-tat sounded on the open house door below, followed by a voice we both immediately recognised. "Are you at home, Mrs. Benison?" Another knock, and a pause. And then light quick footsteps in the hall, and now the voice again, this time at the foot of the stair. "Are you up there, Mrs. Benison? It is only I—Valerie Thrapp. Oh, there you are—both of you! May I come up just for a moment?—I have a message for you from Sir Andrew." She came charging up the long flight and stopped before us, her full bold handsome face aglow, her dark eyes flashing a triumphant light.

"It is all right—all settled! You are to have Cherry as soon as you like. Not a legal adoption, you know, at least not at first; just the ordinary boarding-out business for the present. But it comes to the same thing, really, in a case like this. You need not be afraid—trust Sir Andrew to get the whole thing through in time."

She stopped to fetch her breath, laughing at herself.

"I am a little blown, as you can see. I just got on to 'Friar Tuck' as soon as I heard the news and galloped all the way to tell you. And now I want to propose a scheme. To-morrow I'll get the Admingtons to lend me the brougham and the pair of Irish bloods; and you and I, dear Mrs. Benison, let us two go to Marshminster and fetch him away together, shall we?"

CHAPTER XIII

THE TIGER AND THE TURNIP

LINDA had been gone to Marshminster these three hours back. The day was wearing on towards evening. Tired at last of sitting in my study pretending to read, but really most of the time staring out of the window at the burning November woods, I got up from my chair and went forth on an errand that had suddenly pressed upon me—to find someone to talk to, no matter whom.

The dim old house seemed strangely lonesome and silent with Linda away: more so than I had ever known it. Stopping in the hall, I could hear Mrs. Odling moving briskly about in the kitchen quarters humming a merry tune to herself the while. I went half a dozen steps in that direction, but checked and changed my mind. I passed on through the garden-door at the rear of the house, and went forth to find Willim.

He was not in the great flint-walled rectangle of the kitchen-garden, not in the orchard, not in any of the poultry runs. But I found him at last in the little green patch behind the towering old box-hedge where the beehives were congregated. Willim stood in a sort of brown study, pipe alight, hands thrust deep in trouser-pockets, staring the red setting sun straight in the eye.

I thought, as I quietly approached him, myself as yet unobserved, that here at least was one perfectly unchanged specimen of the aboriginal Sussex peasant still left in the world. There was nothing of the conventional country yokel about William Odling, nor is there about any of our people truly indigenous to the soil. They make no pretence of smartness indeed. Deliberation of speech and manner form part of their ancient birthright. But though slow of tongue, they are curiously quick in heart and head. I won my way to the spot where Willim stood, by a devious path through the crowding hives, and halting at his side, faced about with him, and fell to slowly charging my own pipe. For a minute or two neither of us spoke, but stood side by side looking away together over the misty, plover-haunted river flats at the fast declining sun.

"Willim," said I, at last, "what do you think of it?"

In Sussex we never answer a question, however simple, without first going through a process of appearing profoundly to weigh our words. I looked round at Willim as I spoke. He never moved his eyes from the sun, but a twinkling smile came into them, gradually diffusing itself over the whole of his wrinkled nut-brown old face. Then a great hairy hand was hauled up from below, and his hat—he always wore a discarded one of my own—was pushed back over his grisly poll. The hand then very slowly removed the clay pipe from its place in the centre of his dense curly mop of a beard. Finally he turned to me, and our eyes met in a long steady interchange of goodwilll.

"Well; 'tis another mouth to feed, Reverend, and that there be no denying," said he. "But 'tis naun but a little small mouth, as the ould gell there says. And she be right. 'Twunt make no wonderful deal o'

difference. Reckon as we'll get along middlin', same as we allers has done, please the Lord."

"It isn't the extra cost in living expenses, Willim—that will be a mere nothing. What I am really thinking of is the change in our life here which it is likely to bring about."

"Nauthin?" Willim put a peculiar stress on his echo of my word. "Nauthin, did ye say, Reverend? Ay, surelye, not in money, very like. But there's more ways than one as a man can be made to pay in. Cost ain't allers to be reckoned up in cash."

"I know, Willim. And it is that I was thinking of. It is nothing new to you and Mrs. Odling to have little children about the house. All your early life was passed in a family atmosphere. But it is different with me. I have been a solitary all my life. I suppose I wasn't made for a family man, and there is something lacking in my nature. But to tell you the honest truth, Willim . . . Well, the more I think of it, the less——"

"Reverend!"

The old man knocked his pipe out on his leather gaiter, and started slowly to charge the pipe again. All the time he looked not at what he was doing, but at me. It was a curiously troubled glance.

"Reverend, did ever I tell ye the ould story of the Tiger and the Turnip?"

I had heard such a multiplicity of stories at one time and another from Willim Odling during the long years of our connection, that I had to consider my answer.

"No. I don't think you ever did, Willim."

"Well, 'twur this way. 'Twur out in some furrin country, Oireland or Ingy or somewheres where there was wild beasties: doan't matter where. And there was a village full o' heathen folk just like we, only they

was black. And there was a joker in that village, same as there be here—too many on 'em. And the joker, he goes out one evening a little ways along the road, and he sticks up a holler turnip with a bit o' candle in it in the hedge. 'Cause why? 'Cause he had a friend as allers said he was afeard o' nauthin. And the friend, ye see, had to go to the next village that same night, as the joker knowed right enough. Well; the friend, he traipsed along all so gay till he came to the turnip with its great shining eyes. And that give him the biggest fright o' his life. He ran a mile, he did, and never stopped till he reckoned he was quite safe. And as he was walking along thankin' the ould graven image as he worshipped for his deliverance something moved in the long grass by the roadside. ''Tis only a mouse,' says the man, and laughed, and made to pass on. But 'twur more'n a mouse—'twur a tiger, as came out the next moment and finished the man off in a minute or two, as neat as could be. Ye see, Reverend, where the man went awry?—he was froughtened o' the wrong thing. He should have run from the tiger, not from the turnip."

I turned this over in my mind a little.

"What makes you think I am frightened at the wrong thing, Willim?" said I, dimly perceiving at last that there was some drift in the story personal to myself.

"Furnitur," he returned laconically. "Fine tables and cheers an' such like. And rocking-horses and things as cost a purse full o' money. Them's what oughter ha' froughtened ye, Reverend, if ye had eyes in the front o' your head like ornery folk."

"Oh! You mean, I suppose, that we should not have allowed Miss Thrapp to do what she did for the child? Why, what possible harm——"

"I didn't say 'we': I said 'you.' Ay! and I mean it, Reverend. Harm?—bless your heart—no! Not on your side. There bean't a scrap o' harm in thought nor deed in the whole of your body. That be your worst fault—y'are too hinnocent. And such folk think it shame to study to keep the looks o' hinnocence. They 'lows as it ought to shine out plain o' its own self. But ornery sinful folk, Reverend . . ."

He pulled up short at that. I heard his teeth shut on his pipe-stem like a trap. He blew a great eddying cloud of smoke into the darkening air. Then he turned his old troubled eyes full upon me.

"*She!*" He put a queer emphasis on the word, half scornful, half indignant. "She! Oh, we knows the size o' her pretty well here in Fairthorne. Harn't she been arter ye, Reverend, these long years back? Ain't we seed it clear as clear, every man Jack and woman Jill o' us, an' boy and gell, up and down the village: every sinful sowl o' us, barrin' your own up-in-the-cloud holy self? Ay! we seed through her right enough. But there was naun o' the holler turnip about that'n. 'Twur real dangerous stuff. We was all froughtened sure, and with good reason. And we could do nobbut stand and look on, and worrit and wait, knowing as how sooner or later out she'd spring. Ay! th'ould gell and me, many's the time as she would have gone to ye and tould ye straight to your 'ead, Reverend, only I kept her back seeing no good to foller, you being what ye are. But then, thank the Lord, off ye goes and home ye comes wi' a wife, and 'tis all blue sky and sunshine wi' us agen—leastways so we thought, mother and me, till along comes this onexpected plaguey bit o' dark cloud o' furnitur and rocking-horses and things. Depend on't 'tis mischief she means. Parson, parson! ne'er worry over a child more or less. Leave the turnip

aloane, but look out for the tiger, says I! Hark! There they be at last!"

A distant rumble of wheels grew into the red evening quiet. There was no mistaking the sound made by the Admington family chariot. Willim and I bolted off together in the direction of the sound and just reached the front gates as the carriage with its flashing lamps came to a halt before them. The door opened. Linda stepped out holding up to me a warning finger. Though it was nearly dark there under the great ilexes I could see her face shining with a radiantly happy light.

"Hush! He is asleep, Frank. I think we will take him straight in and up to bed—he is tired out with the long drive, bless him! You get hold of him and carry him in, dear, will you?"

But there came an eager whispered word from the dark depths of the brougham.

"I think I had better do it, Mrs. Benison. If I let him out of my arms, it may wake him. Oh, he is quite light, Rector; I can manage it easily."

Mrs. Odling led the way on stealthy tiptoe followed by Valerie Thrapp with a slender little object which I presumed to be the slumbering Cherry, though I could see nothing of him, muffled up in her great fur cloak. All was ready in the oriel-room—a fire burning rich and low, and a shaded lamp secreted in the corner farthest from the bed. The three women passed in together, Willim and I not venturing farther than the door, but peering in over one another's shoulders, the while we held our breath for fear of rousing the precious child. Mrs. Odling, by right of matronly experience, assumed command of the disrobing operation, the interchange of day-gear for night attire. But though to me, ignorant of these things and looking on from afar,

it seemed that her hands moved with a deft delicacy such as would not have disturbed a fly, the child came suddenly broad awake as at length Mrs. Odling lowered him gently into the little silk-draped cot. He promptly sat bolt upright, and fell to investigating his new surroundings with his tiny hands. To my intense relief he made no outcry. He seemed to be in perfect good humour, passing curious fingers over everything within reach until they arrived in due course on the stiff, slippery alpaca of Mrs. Odling's ample bosom. And then he gave vent to a polite little interjection of disappointment and alarm.

"Who is it, please? Oh, I don't want you! I want Nurse Mary. I want——"

In a moment Linda was at the cot-side. She caught the tiny fluttering hands in her own and brought them to her lips.

"Here I am, Cherry darling! Close by you all the time. Why, you have been asleep on the journey, and now you are safe in the house which is going to be your home. Here you are snug, and warm in your own little bed in your own pretty room which is close to mine. You will only have to call ever so softly if you want me in the night, and I shall hear you and will come to you in a moment. You won't be afraid, darling, will you? And you know what name to call me by, don't you, dear? Just say it, Cherry, so that I shall know you haven't forgotten."

I saw the small oval face under its shock of flaxen hair lift to Linda's, and the sightless eyes search for hers just as if they felt the love-light that she was pouring down upon him. He broke into a smile.

"Mother!"

"Ah, God!"

We all turned sharply in the direction whence the

second voice came. It was Valerie Thrapp who had uttered the exclamation following so closely upon Cherry's glad word. Without a doubt it had been Valerie; though now, as we all looked at her in surprise, I began to doubt my ears. There she stood by the fireplace, just as she had been standing since her entry, leaning easily on the mantel the while she watched with friendly smiling face the work of the other two women,—work, however, in which she had offered no part. And now, as all eyes fastened upon her, she still smiled with the same self-composure and genial interest in the proceedings as ever, steadily countering Linda's rather anxious puzzled glance. She began to draw her cloak about her shoulders in a leisurely way.

"I can see very well, Mrs. Benison," she said, with a quiet laugh, "that Cherry will never go to sleep with all this kingly retinue about him, and you will be glad enough to reduce the party by one at least. Besides, I ought to go now! I must not let the horses stand any longer. Good-bye! you won't mind if I look in to-morrow just to see how his royal highness fares after all this excitement? Good night, Mrs. Odling!"

She advanced hurriedly towards the door where Willim and I blocked the way. But as I retired before her, intending, as I was bound, to escort her down to the carriage, she stopped and looked back upon the scene she was leaving. Linda knelt by the little bed, and Cherry was also on his knees leaning over the cot-side to fondle her, his small white hands travelling to and fro over her face and neck. As Valerie paused to look back, the child gave a little shrill cry. In one hand he had grasped the cross that Linda wore, and with the other he was feeling about on his own neck.

"Oh, you promised, didn't you? You said you

would bring one for me, too, when you came. Where is it? Oh, do let me have it now!"

Linda was evidently nonplussed at this—even distressed.

"Cherry darling, I am so very sorry. I tried all the shops in our town here, and not one had got just the kind I wanted to give you. But to-morrow you shall have it, dear. Only wait till to-morrow. I will get one from somewhere or other, never fear."

Valerie turned abruptly back into the room.

"Dear Mrs. Benison!—what a wonderful bit of luck! Why, I came across the very thing you want only the other day in Marshminster, and here it is in my pocket, chain and all! When a child wants a thing, he always wants it that very instant and hates to wait. It is such a shame to disappoint him."

She had drawn out a little packet. Something glittered and tinkled. At the sound I saw Cherry's two hands go out in delighted anticipation. Gratefully, as I could see, Linda took from Valerie the silver cross and chain and proceeded to clasp it round the child's neck. When she had done this, she drew back to Valerie's side, and the two stood smilingly watching the effect. Cherry knelt up on the bed in his white gown delightedly fingering his new acquisition. And almost at the first touch he uttered a low cry of unmistakable joy.

"Oh, he has sent it to me! My father!"

Linda started forward.

"No; not your father, dear. It is Miss Thrapp here, another good friend of yours, Cherry. It is her gift, darling, and we must thank her for it, don't you think?"

But Cherry would have none of this. Though he was evidently dog-tired, he continued to handle the

cross in a spate of joy and excitement, in no wise, however, forgetting his manners.

"Oh no! Really, please! Oh, I know it, I know it. It is not like yours—not like anybody else's. All these little bumps along the edges! My father! he has sent it to me because—because he thought I might be lonely. O, I know, I know!"

Forgetting, then, how he had become possessed of his treasure in the joy of its possession, the weary Cherry first sat himself down, and then lay himself down with a little sigh and yawn of ineffable satisfaction, all the while hugging the cross to his breast. Once or twice the sigh and yawn were repeated, but at widening intervals. At length his quiet regular breathing told us that he had dropped off to sleep. Linda crept back to Valerie's side.

"Is it possible that it could have belonged to his father, do you think?" I heard her whisper, as the two made for the door together, their arms about each other now.

I scarce knew Valerie's voice as she answered passing me by, it sounded so strained and hard.

"Not the slightest chance, I am afraid. All a fancy, probably; it is only a very common pattern, you know. Anyhow, it has pleased his royal highness, and that's the main thing."

She glanced at the clock on the stair.

"Goodness! Is that the time? I must fly! The horses will catch their death of cold. Good-bye, dear Mrs.—— No, dear Linda! Good-bye all!"

She took the last stairs at a single bound, and was gone into the blue-dark autumn night.

CHAPTER XIV

QUICKSANDS

CAN it be true, as averred in old pagan philosophy, that to every human being in this life is granted a definite and equal amount of happiness which it is wholly outside the power of any to augment or decrease?

If so, then into those few weeks following Cherry's arrival at Fairthorne Rectory must have been crowded a very great proportion of my dear wife's allotted share of earthly bliss.

The halcyon time began for her—and for me, indeed, as far as beginnings count—with that first morning when Cherry made one more, and such a redoubtable one, in our daily gathering for family prayer. When I got to my place at the breakfast-table with the great Bible on my knee and the little hushed, expectant circle about the room, I was already moved with a strange, pleasurable emotion. So were we all, I could feel; and no wonder. Shall I ever forget the sight of that littleslender figure in its pale-blue jersey and bright-buckled shoes erect at the top of the stair, with Linda half-way down, and the Odlings and myself at the bottom waiting breathless, watching with all our eyes?

" I won't help you, Cherry dear," Linda was saying. " It is so much better for you to find out everything for yourself from the very first. Thirteen steps, you know, and then the soft wool-mat. And then feel out with your toes for the head of the great bearskin in the hall and walk along over our old bear till you come to his tail, or where his tail ought to be, and then strike off to the right towards where you hear the old grandfather-clock ticking by the door of the breakfast-room. And there you are. Now come!"

We watched him venture downward smilingly, confidently, step by step, his little face turned in the direction of the voice he was already growing to love so well ; his hands playing a low, slow resonant tune on the old oak banisters as he felt his way down ; and step by step Linda receded with outstretched guarding arms before him. A brand-new high-chair was waiting for him on the sunny side of the table. He urbanely but firmly declined to be hurried or assisted in any way, even by Linda ; but felt the chair all over very carefully before climbing into it. The one thing she did for him when we were all seated for prayers and the usual preliminary hush had fallen on the room, was to put his little hands together. And thus she gently held them between her own the while I read.

Sitting now in my study writing this in the dead of night, many a year afterwards—many a long, lonely year, God knows—I can shut my eyes and bring back at will in all its vividness the sight upon which I could not forbear to steal a glance, more than one indeed, that morning, even though prayer was on my lips : the two heads, big and little, bowed together under the same crown of sunshine, the light searching out hidden gleams of silver in the soft brown of one,

and turning the other into just a tumbled mass of sun-riddled gold.

In those early days of Cherry's life with us, I did not expect too vast an amount of Linda's companionship. Nor did I get it. There was first everything about the ancient parsonage-house for the two to explore. And then the gardens; the rambling old stables with room for half-a-dozen steeds where but one obese old pony was stalled; the pigsties, the poultry-pens, the apiary, the row of rabbit-hutches on stilts—William Odling's special pride. From the window of my little crow's-nest of a study up in the roof, I could overlook most of my domain, and I kept on getting odd glimpses here and there of Linda's brown-holland garden-bonnet and Cherry's sky-blue jersey amidst the crowding trees and undergrowth—the two spots of colour continually appearing and disappearing at successive stations near and far.

I made but poor progress with my reading that first morning. At length, towards noon, just as I was going to give it up and join the exploration-party out of doors, I caught sight of them coming down the bowling-green between the old espalier apples. Now there were three instead of two, and there was no mistaking the tall feminine figure in its warm brown tweeds voyaging along so easily on Cherry's other side. The two women were exchanging what were evidently eager, happy confidences over the head of the child who, hand in hand with each, appeared to be leading, rather than being led by, them. It was too far off for me to make out the drift of their talk. But Linda's clear bright laugh continually came up to me through the still air of the autumn morning, and Valerie Thrapp seemed in equally mirthful mood. I strained eyes and ears after the little party until it

turned out of view through the paddock-gate; and then glumly enough I went back to the table and sat myself down again resolutely to my book. With fierce determination I read at least half a page. But chancing to look out at the window once more, I saw Willim had brought out the old pony and Cherry was astride of it, or at least, as much of its absurdly broad back as his legs could encompass, remaining there only by the joint efforts of the two women who walked one on either side.

At lunch that day, both Linda and the child were bursting with a piece of news for me.

"Old Blossom—he is really too ridiculously fat for anything," said Linda, flushing with pleasure at what she had to tell. "So Valerie has promised to bring down the little Shetland pony from the Manor to-morrow when she comes on her own horse, and she is going to teach Cherry to ride in proper style. She says he will soon pick it up, and will be able in time to go with her anywhere on the leading rein. Isn't it lovely for him, Frank! I can't tell what makes her so friendly and kind!"

So the halcyon time passed for Linda, and drew on into weeks, every hour bringing me fuller assurance of the good which Cherry's advent had brought into my dear wife's life. Of course it meant a deal of extra work for her. At first she seemed to be knitting and sewing for him from morning to night, and Mrs. Odling with her, for the most part. To my frequent remonstrances on this score, however, I got but the one reply. Winter was coming on, and the precious child had possessed not a single serviceable garment of any kind but those supplied to him from the workhouse store; and these, I now learnt for the first time, had been left behind when Linda went to fetch the boy,

she having taken with her privily a set of garments for him purchased ready-made in Stavisham by the same fairy godmother whose magic wand had produced the linnet and the rocking-horse.

This piece of belated information stuck in my mind persistently for the rest of the day. I knew Valerie Thrapp of old as a woman of large and generous impulses. But I was scarcely prepared for the apparently unlimited extent of her benefactions as evinced in what she had done for Cherry. I began to wonder uneasily to what length she would go next: whether I had indeed been yet informed of the whole range of her beneficences already achieved. And upon what ultimately dangerous, but still yet easily avoidable quicksands was it all likely to steer us?

I contrived to lead up to this latter point, quite deftly, I fancied to myself, one evening after the boy was safe in bed, and Linda and I were sitting by the fire talking about him, as usual.

"Dearie," said I, conning her over through my tobacco-smoke as her busy needle flew out rhythmically on its slender leash, and she bent to her work silently for the moment, "I have never seen you looking so well and strong since you came to Fairthorne, and I believe it is all Cherry's doing. I can't tell you how grateful and glad I am about the whole business. But we must begin to look ahead a little for him, don't you think? Of course he is not ours yet, legally. But there is very little likelihood of anything occurring to upset our plan of being father and mother to him for the rest of his life. Humanly speaking, his chances for the future now depend on us alone. And that is just what I have been thinking of a lot of late. Linda dear, there is an awkward side to all this interest of Valerie Thrapp in the boy. No harm

has been done at present, perhaps. But it is what it may lead to. The best I can hope to do for him in the future is what a poor country parson can do for a son. And that's not very much, as the world goes now. We must guard—don't you think?—against its unsettling him: taking him out of his station. It is time, in my opinion, that we put the brake a little on Valerie Thrapp."

Linda had left off her sewing, and sat looking at me now with her needle poised at full stretch of its glittering silken thread, a touch of comical perplexity in her dear eyes.

"You really think so?" she hesitated after a pause. There followed another pause. "I suppose I have been selfish, Frank," she went on slowly, ponderingly, that comically troubled glance still upon me. "At least, selfish for Cherry's sake. But it is so little we could have done beyond sheer necessities for him. And I do so love to see everything nice about him, and so does Valerie. And he is so very young. And with his affliction, how can it possibly——"

"No; I don't say it can—not yet, at least. But as things are with us, it may all tend to create a false position, do not you think?"

I suppose there was more of anxiety in my voice and look than I had intended should appear there, for I saw the merry light suddenly quench in Linda's eyes. She laid down her work, looking intently across at me.

"Frank, tell me candidly. You have a dislike for Valerie Thrapp, have you not? If anyone else had done this, your old and trusted friend Miss Lisle, for instance——"

But that was the very last inference I desired her to draw from what I had said.

"Linda, my dearest girl! You are absolutely wrong. I have not the faintest shadow of dislike for her. Why should I have? Only I—I——"

"Why should you? That was exactly my argument with Valerie herself only the other day. She thinks so, Frank, anyway; and said as much. And of course I stood up for you. But all the same, I have often thought——" The look of comical dismay came back into her eyes. "Oh, dear! And now you will hate her more than ever, I suppose, when you come to know!"

"Come to know what, dear?" I asked, as she stopped.

She rose, gaily laughing now, and went over to a dim corner of the room, returning in a moment with a bulky parcel.

"You may as well know the worst at once, Frank," she said, struggling with the string. "It came just before tea, addressed—look!—to Master Cherry Benison. And the printed label says it is from the tailors at Stavisham. Oh, do cut this! I have been wanting to open it for the last hour."

The parcel proved to contain, first, an elegant little knickerbocker suit in brown corded velvet with peaked cap to match, then a tiny pair of box-cloth gaiters adorned with buttons of mother-of-pearl; finally, Linda drew forth and held up to my view a hunting-crop the exact counterpart of Valerie's own as we both immediately recognised—only minus the heavily-loaded handle beloved of huntsmen who, like love, laugh at locks and bars, carrying this secret means for their destruction.

A moment we stood confronting each other. And then Linda dropped the things in a heap on the floor. She threw her arms about my neck, shaking now with uncontrollable mirth.

"Oh, Frank, don't look so unutterably wretched! I am just as surprised as you, and perhaps not altogether pleased. But what does it matter? It is very extravagant of her, no doubt. Still, extravagance of this unselfish sort isn't a crime, is it, dear? And just think how lovely he will look when they ride out together to-morrow! You must be here to see them go. I have promised to have Cherry all ready and waiting on the doorstep when Valerie comes at two."

But I took care not to be there, nor within hailing distance, about the time the calvacade was due to start. Instead, I went for a long walk over the Downs, taking for my objective the lonely house at Dingle Bottom where the unruly old couple dwelt. On arriving there, the woman alone confronted me. Her husband, she said, speaking thickly and directing upon me a moist and minatory eye, was abed and had been this fortnight back. Very sadly, he was, by her account. What was the matter? "Caan't get on his legs," she explained, taking a grip on the door-post to steady herself, as though in sympathy she had acquired a little of the same complaint.

On her bidding, I went in and up to the sufferer's room. Old Linchett was a horse-dealer, and had been a trainer once upon a time in quite a considerable way. But certain shady transactions in which he had been involved had brought the more lucrative part of his business to an incontinent end, since which time he had devoted himself to horse-dealing on its more disreputable side. He had long been a familiar figure at all the horse-fairs in that part of the county, with his string of dubious beasts; and the most that could be said for him was that he was perhaps among the least shady of a notoriously shady crew.

I found him hunched up in bed under a gaudy, but very dirty patchwork quilt, with an old red woollen night-cap set rakishly over one blear eye. Ordinarily, that is to say when he was out and about the place at his work of tending his stock of sorry steeds, I had found on these visits of mine that there had been only two topics of conversation practicable between us—the delinquencies of his wife, and matters peculiar to the stable. On these, especially the former, he had an inexhaustible, if rather too forceful eloquence; but as my knowledge of horses was meagre to the last degree, the subject moreover leading in no way to the traditional object of a parson's visit, the talk commonly settled down to the former theme. To-day, however, he surprised me by uttering no word on either the one or the other. After he had regaled me at vast length with an account of his symptoms, all easily attributable to an excess of strong drink, he turned the talk in quite a new direction.

"Ah, these here noospapers, Reverend," said he, shaking his head solemnly, "what a power o' terrible things they do find to put into print, to be sure an' all! Naun but robberies and rick-burnings and murders and sech-like day arter day. Sick o' reading on 'em, I be." He stopped and bent a sly, and what struck me as a very anxious glance upon me. "This here murder, now, o' the pore feller on the Down atween Stavisham and Fairthorne—dear, oh Lor'! terrible sad, warn't it? Have ye heerd tell o' anything new as has been found out along o' that?"

"Nothing at all," I told him. "And there never will be, in my opinion, Linchett. It will just be forgotten now, like all the other unexplained mysteries that have happened in the world."

He seemed to listen keenly. He heaved a sigh.

almost a gasp of what curiously sounded less like regret than downright relief.

" Ah, very like, very like, Reverend. What a pity! what a pity! Ay, ay! to be sure an' all."

He was still bending upon me that sly interrogatory glance out of a waxy, mottled face for ever twinging with pain. With great difficulty now, he shifted his posture a little and fell to rummaging under his pillows. He drew forth at length a handful of well-thumbed newspaper cuttings.

" I ha' it all here," said he, turning over the greasy crumpled slips. " The diskivery o' the pore feller, and the crowner's quest, and all as wur wrote about it. I knows the place well where a' wur found. Terrible, terrible, 'twur! Ah dear, oh Lor'! "

This sort of talk did not seem likely to lead to the opening I was looking for.

" Linchett," said I, determined to make the best of the occasion, however, " you know what is at the bottom of nearly all tragedies in the world, and perhaps everything else that is bad? It is the drink, isn't it? Now, I firmly believe that, if we knew how this poor fellow came by his sad end, we should find that drink was the real first cause of it somewhere or other. You may be sure, as sure as you know you are lying on this bed, that the murder, if it was a murder, would never have been committed if—why! it might have been your very own self, John Linchett, in one of your tantrums, as I have often seen you—if someone had not . . ."

I stopped then for very joy at the obviously deep and sudden impression my words had made on the hardened old rascal. I felt that nothing more I could say could possibly add to the effect already achieved. He went first white and then blue with

consternation. When at last he was able to speak, he fairly shook, if not with contrition at least with abject terror. He clawed at my arm.

"Ne'er another drop, Reverend!" he quavered, though in a whisper with an apprehensive glance on the door. "Ne'er another drop 'long as I live, s' help me, God! Ah, 'tis trew! Ye've spoke the trewth, as naun but Gorramighty could ha' tould ye! No, I never will, and never have, not a single drop—no! not since—since that there night when I—I——"

His words petered out into rambling incoherence. He fell back and seemed to lapse into a sort of fit, his eyes asquint, his face congested, his arms wildly threshing the air above the bed. I hastily summoned Mrs. Linchett from the dark dank bowels of the house, and together we did what we could for the old man. When I turned homeward from Dingle Bottom some half-hour later, I left him slumbering heavily but fairly quietly, having promised to let the doctor know of his state.

It was verging on dusk when I reached the village. As I came through the little winding tree-cumbered lane towards the Rectory, a dark figure emerged from my gate and turned in the opposite direction. I knew who it was at once. I checked my pace, designing to let Valerie Thrapp get well away before I made my own approach. But, on an impulse a moment later, I started forward to follow her, calling her name.

Whether she heard me the first time or the second, I could not be sure. She kept steadily on in the dim rose-red light. But as I halted, undecided whether to call a third time, she stopped, turned, stood there under the deep shadow of the trees obviously waiting for me to come up with her. She was in her riding-habit, looking just as she had looked on that portentous

evening when she had come to me in the church with her extraordinary confession. But now it was not the altar-candles, but a gleam from the ruddy western sky that cut across her face as she stood stock-still, looking back over her shoulder at me.

"Well?" she said, very quietly, guardedly, as I stopped before her.

I was not going to mince matters. I blurted straight out with what had been burdening my mind all day long.

"Valerie," said I, "you are giving me very deep concern. Why are you doing it? Cannot you see that by coming to the Rectory constantly now, as you are doing, you may bring great trouble upon all here? There was enough talk about us two in the old days. But now that I am married——"

She laughed. It was a low, strained laugh; mirthless enough, but in no wise bitter.

"Oh, life is fair enough for you," she said, looking away. "I am always thinking of that, Frank, and rejoicing in it. It is something at least saved from the wreck. And cannot *you* see something as well? Cannot you guess what a comfort and a real strengthening help it is to me to look on a little at this wonderful new happiness of yours? Won't you give me credit for a little unselfishness, even—even when you know what you know?"

As she spoke, her tone gradually softened. The last words were uttered with a deep, vibrant tenderness. A sudden sense came over me that I was acting like a despicable brute.

"Valerie, it isn't that," I hastened to assure her. "Believe it or not, as you like; but the truth is I am always thinking of you. What you told me on that night of the horse-fair has never been out of my

mind a moment since. If I could really do anything that could save you from pain, I would do it at any cost—any cost but one. And that is the point, Valerie—dear, dear friend that you have always been to me, and I such a dull, selfish clod! It is true that I asked you to help my wife in her new work. But I spoke hastily—without thinking. I have since realised that it would not do—as much on your account as on hers and mine. And I thought you also had come to see this. I thought your never coming to the Rectory until now, and your giving up the church work——"

"Oh, Frank, don't torture me! It is true. I did come to see that. And I do see it now. But it has been too hard for me. I had to cast about for an easier way. And then came Cherry like a little angel of light across all our paths. Cherry! darling sweet boy! How I love him already! I believe God sent him straight to me to hold me true and pure just as I was weakening and going down into—into—— Oh, Frank, don't ask me to give up this! The child has broken a hole in my black sky, and the sun is pouring through upon me again. If you let me live in that light, I know I can keep my life good and true for—for his sake. But drive me away now——"

Her voice broke. She turned away, making furtive dabs at her cheeks. Suddenly she faced me again.

"Look what I have done for him!" she cried. "When I tell you, you may despise me. But you will not doubt any longer."

"Done for him?" I echoed, beside myself. "You have done more, a great deal more, than we wanted—more, indeed, than I believe is good for the boy, or good for us. This, at any rate, must stop now,

Valerie. One never knows what wrong conclusions people may draw."

She laughed as she had done before. But now there was in the laugh a bitter scorn—not, indeed, for me, as I at first imagined, but for someone else, as I was directly to learn. She disregarded my words.

"Yes: you will despise me. But you cannot doubt my love for Cherry, when you hear. That old silver cross I gave him—the child was right—it was his poor murdered father's, found upon his neck by the police. And how do you think I got it? Why, when Linda—your wife—told me all about Cherry the day of our meeting in Stavisham, and told me how she had promised to give the boy a cross like her own to wear, after he had said his father wore one too; and when I learned from her that she had been all over the town failing to get anything of the kind, why then I set my wits to work. I knew from Sir Andrew that all the effects of the dead man had been locked up in the strong-room at Mr. Ferriday's office, to take care of for the police. The cross was among them, Frank, and—and I got it. It took me a long time, but I succeeded at last. Of course it had to be paid for, and paid for at a hateful price. But——"

"What do you mean, Valerie?" I cried, suddenly aghast.

Her lip curled ever so slightly.

"I had to make love to him a little. And the cross was paid for by—a kiss," she said.

I stood blankly staring.

"Don't you see?" she went on, in a nervous hurry now, her face aflame. "You never knew. But for a long time past the—the conceited fool has had the impudence to follow me up: what that class of man would call paying his addresses to me, I suppose. At

the hunt ball last winter he was insufferable. And ever since—— Frank, don't think hardly of me. I wanted the cross so very, very badly. And I soon saw that the only way—oh, you *must* understand!"

"No, Valerie! I don't understand. Why did you want that particular cross? Surely any jeweller in Marshminster could have——"

"I wanted that one, and no other," she stubbornly, sullenly insisted, lashing at her riding-boot with her whip in the old fierce, impatient way. "At any rate, I got it; never mind how. And the rest you know."

I looked at the ripe red lips before me. I thought of Ferriday in his expensive clothes, a great gold watch-chain straddling his paunch, his sallow, fleshy face with its baggy eyes creasing out of sight in triumphant radiations of victory. A white-hot indignation swept over me.

"Valerie, I don't understand. But what I do understand is that a very awkward time may now lie before you. For, having gained your object, you cannot possibly intend to continue your favours in that direction. It is simply inconceivable. A common, jumped-up, conceited dolt like that!"

Her quiet laugh mingled with the steady rhythmic strokes on the boot.

"Don't alarm yourself. Women have a way of suddenly changing their minds in these tender matters, and Mr. Ferriday will now have to learn that lesson. I have already taken steps. You need not worry."

"But, Valerie, do you realise the sort of man he is? No hint, even the broadest, will be of any avail with him. Nothing but the plainest, hardest words knocked into his thick head with a sledge-hammer, can possibly——"

"And he has got them, Frank. I have seen to

that very thoroughly. I don't think he will ever open the subject of his matrimonial aspirations to me again."

"Then you have made a bitter enemy of him for life, I can very well see."

"What does it matter?" she returned. "What more of ill can befall me in the world than has already come upon me? I care not a brass farthing whether he be angry or pleased."

CHAPTER XV

THE BROKEN TRAIL

ONE day—I call to mind that it was in early December, the trees all but stripped bare of their autumn glories, a biting wind abroad on the leas—a note came for me as we all sat together at breakfast, the envelope somewhat damp and sticky by reason of its having arrived by the same youthful hand which conveyed the morning milk.

"Listen to this, Linda," I said, after glancing it through. "'Blue-Bottles, Sunday evening. (Per Jack Bridger, in consideration of two oranges duly handed over and accepted for the trust.) From Malcolm Garth, hewer of stone, to his reverence the Rector of Fairthorne, and the admired and respected lady his wife: greeting: Whereas this lowly but ancient tenement being now swept and garnished and otherwise rendered habitable, and being furnished within into some sort of comfort: the occupier thereof hereby humbly craves the presence at or about the hour of seven on this next Monday evening of the aforesaid Rector and Lady for the purpose of mutual interchange of edifying converse and the consumption of certain edibles and potables for that purpose provided.

In short, my dear Rector, I should dearly love to see Mrs. Benison and your good self here to supper and to spend the evening with me, that is if you can put up with bachelor company, not to mention bachelor cooking. Do come if you can. There will be only we three.'"

"Yes," said Linda, on reflection. "Your Bible-class will be over by seven, and so will my mothers' meeting. We will go, Frank. Besides, it is time he and I exchanged a few more ideas on the subject he broached to us on the Downs that morning—you remember? Yes! I should like to go. That is, of course, if you can manage not to be late for once."

I did manage it, although by the skin of my teeth, as the saying is. When we pushed back the creaking little garden-gate at Blue-Bottles, and advanced toward the open door of the house whence a warm flood of firelight and candlelight issued to give us welcome, a ringing, cheerful voice hailed us from within.

"Come in, Mrs. Benison! Come in, Rector! I can't leave the pot just for the moment. I am dishing up, as you observe. So delighted to see you both. There are some hat-pegs behind the door, Rector! and if Mrs. Benison would not mind stepping into the little bedroom over there —— That's famous! It's haggis, you know, the real thing done to a second; and if I can only land it on to the dish without breaking . . . Hurrah! Did you notice the skilful co-operation of fork and ladle? Ah, it takes a Scotsman to do that! Now draw up, and we will fall to. God bless me! How glad I am to see you both!"

After such a right welcoming word as that, we could do no less than look, and indeed feel, as glad as he; and we were soon gathered round the board, Linda and I smiling at each other through a cloud of steam,

the most appetisingly fragrant I think that ever I breathed.

As the meal progressed, to the tune of a bright running commentary on everything in general and nothing in particular from our host, I could not help looking about me, thunderstruck at the changes he had made in the old house. We were feasting in what I remembered had been the kitchen in former years. But Garth had pulled down the ceiling and thrown into it the room above so as to make of the two a single spacious lofty apartment vaulted like an old monastic refectory. All manner of quaint benches, stools, and sideboards of ancient oak stood about the walls. Various specimens of ecclesiastical sculpture hung there—heads of saints and bas-reliefs of scriptural subjects interspersed with delicate drawings of carved mullions and fan-traceries and finicles, and the like, and designs for stained window-glass glowing with rich colour. The floor was strewn with carpets of Persian and Indian work that looked to me of priceless value. Wherever I turned my eyes I lit upon some fresh wonder of beauty wrought in wood or metal or fabric of rich dye.

"All picked up from time to time on various wanderings about the world," explained the Gargoyle Man, noticing my enquiring, admiring gaze. "I had them stowed away in a warehouse in London, but as this cathedral job in Marshminster is going to last me all the winter, by the look of it, I thought I would make a real home here for the time being. So I had the stuff sent down. Do not you like that Diana over the fireplace, Mrs. Benison?"

We both looked in the direction indicated, and then we looked at each other. The same thought had evidently occurred to both. The picture showed us a

stalwart, ruddy-cheeked young goddess, airily attired in a fallow-pelt and a bow and arrow, pursuing a fawn through a woodland glade. Garth obviously saw the glance we exchanged.

"It is like, isn't it?" he said, leaning back in his chair to get a better view of the picture. "And the strange thing is I bought it at an old shop in Venice years before—before she and I met. No idea who painted it. But it is good, and very old: a hundred years I should say, at least. Is it not strange that some Italian painter all that time ago must have had a vision almost identical with the one—well, with the one I have constantly in my own head now?"

At that there fell upon us all three one of those sudden silences that sometimes so inexplicably descend upon the most glibly chattering crew. Garth broke it at length with a shrug and a laugh whose carelessness was obviously fictitious. He pushed the whisky-jar over to me.

"Try it again, Rector," he cried, gaily rallying me. "Though Mrs. Benison scorns it, I regret to observe, you and I are pledged to encourage real merit wherever we find it. Good Highland pot-still; 'tis old as the hills."

The haggis was followed by delectable oaten-cakes cooked in honey from the same heather fastnesses where the whisky was brewed, and these again gave place to a cheese whose cavernous verdant ripeness, explored tenderly by our host with a silver scoop, gave forth an aroma all but equalling that of the haggis itself. At length Garth rose and cleared the table of all but the curious old whisky-flagon, brought out a great tobacco-jar, and we were soon sitting round the hearth in three immense upholstered basket-chairs, Garth's pipe and mine sending up clouds as

it were of incense in propitiation of the sporting goddess in the old picture over our heads.

For a minute or two we sat there in cosy luxuriance together, none caring to speak, but all listening to the comfortable rumble of the wind in the wide old-fashioned chimney, and the crisp quiet rustle of the window-glass loose in its diamond leads. Presently Garth took his pipe from his mouth and pointed it at me.

"Rector," said he, "do you remember what I said to you as we walked home from the farm that night after our friend the lawyer had made such an exhibition of himself over our Downland Mystery? I said I had more than half a mind to look into the thing myself and see what I could make of it. Well, I have been doing so, and I have found out a good deal about the dead man which I think, as you have now taken charge of the boy, will interest you both; that is if Mrs. Benison would not prefer our avoidance of gruesome topics on such a cosy occasion."

Linda having expressed her readiness and even anxiety to hear, Garth went on:

"The situation turned out exactly as I thought between the justices' clerk and the Stavisham police. They were as jealous of each other as cats, neither side letting the other know more of the facts of the case than could be officially avoided. So I got to work at first independently of the lot of them. Whenever I was tired of chiselling stone in the cathedral, I went for a stroll round about Marshminster, and the first thing I did was to go and see the landlady of the common lodging house where the man and his little son put up. A wary, austere old female, evidently primed by the police to keep her mouth shut, and in mortal dread of getting into their bad books. But, you know, I

have a way with me, Mrs. Benison "—here he turned to Linda with that sunny grace of a smile irradiating and curiously softening his hard, clever, north-British face, which we had remarked on our former talk with him—" not all bunkum, as you may believe, but I am real fond of folk. And after a bit of talk she let out one thing which you probably know. That is the man's name."

Linda sat up sharply in her chair.

" What was it ? " she asked eagerly.

" It was Liscord," Garth returned ; " L—I—S—C—O—R—D. But I thought you would have learnt that from the child. He was old enough to know his own surname, and——"

" He did know it, but he would not say. His father had forbidden him to tell," I put in.

Garth ruminated a little over this.

" Well, anyway," he went on, " that was the name, according to the old woman. But not another syllable could I get out of her except that she knew nothing of where the pair came from or of their history. Nor did anyone else in the city, as far as I could discover, though I cruised about in all likely quarters for weeks on end. How the two came to the place ; how, after leaving the child with the old woman, the man got from Marshminster to Stavisham on the morning of the day of his disappearance ; all except what he did there between the time of his arrival and the time, late evening, when he was seen taking the path leading to the Downs—all that I have since learnt, and learnt in a way you will never guess. At present I know practically the whole of Liscord's past history, and you two have a right to know it from me—in confidence, of course, seeing that you are now the guardians of the boy."

Here my dear wife, who had been breathlessly listening to Garth's news, broke in upon the narrator.

"Oh, Mr. Garth, tell me! Will they take him from me? Have you found any relatives who may possibly claim Cherry? Oh, do tell me that at once!"

Garth made haste to reply, seeing her agitation.

"Mrs. Benison, you may set your mind completely at rest on that score. There is absolutely no one with any such legal right, as far as we know. But let me tell you the story, or as much of it as has come to light so far, in its proper sequence."

Linda interrupted him again, echoing his words.

"'As far as *we* know'? You said 'we,' Mr. Garth. Then there are others——?"

"I was coming to that," said Garth, with a scarce distinguishable smile at the impetuosity in my wife that was really hindering rather than hastening the communication she sought. "That was where my luck came in, my dear Mrs. Benison, at the very point where I seemed utterly to have missed the trail. To tell you the truth, I was beginning to lose heart and even interest in the whole affair, when, one drizzly evening at Stavisham—after an annoying and perfectly futile interview with the police superintendent there who merely cloaked an obvious ignorance in dunderheaded muteness and mystery—I had hardly left the super's office when I ran straight into the wet umbrella of—who do you think?"

He stopped, with an oscillating glance between the pair of us.

"An innocent-looking old gentleman who was really a detective from London?" I suggested, on a brilliant inspiration.

"Mr. Ferriday," said Linda, with quiet conviction.

"You are right, Mrs. Benison!" cried Garth,

astonished. "And I do not mind telling you it was the last person I wanted to meet in my then hopeless and exasperated mood. But it was a very wet night, and his house was close at hand, and he was so pressingly cordial that I agreed to go in for ten minutes. Well, that was the best stroke of work I ever did, as it turned out. Two bachelors hobnobbing together over pipes and grog before a warm fire in a cosy study on a drenching evening—you may be sure one of them at least soon got communicative, and it was not long before we fell to talking over this very affair. And—well: you will never guess, so I had better tell you straightaway—would you believe it? After all our lawyer friend said at the Markses that night, and in spite of his elaborate parade of secrecy, he himself actually did not know the name of the dead man!"

Garth pulled up here to indulge himself in a ringing hearty laugh. But he was grave enough when he went on.

"No; and I was the man who gave him the information. I got a little of my own back, didn't I? But I had done more than that, it seemed. A queer look came over his face directly I mentioned the name. 'Wait a bit!' says he, thinking hard for a moment. 'Liscord?—Liscord?—it is rather an unusual name. Somehow or other I seem to have heard it before.' He thought a little longer. Then up he jumped. 'I have it!' says he, and went over to some shelves where a whole lot of paper files stood in rows. There he rummaged for a bit, coming back at last with one of the files in his hand. '*Times* Law Reports,' he explained; 'I have cut them out and stored them for years. And here it is, the very one we wanted, five years old.' So down he sat and read out two and a half columns all about a divorce case, 'Liscord versus

Liscord' and—I forget the co-respondent's name: it doesn't matter, I need not bother you with details. It was just the common unsavoury story of marriage in haste and repentance at leisure. Not so much of the last, though, for after only about a couple of years, there was the husband suing for divorce on account of his wife's infidelity, and his getting a verdict with custody of the child."

Garth stopped to re-charge his pipe. I looked across at Linda. The old spots of crimson had started up in her pale cheeks. Her lip trembled.

"And what became of the woman?" she asked, as breathlessly as ever.

Garth lit the pipe very deliberately before replying.

"We don't know," he said. "Ferriday has been very busy since the night of our talk—up to London and all that—but he has found out nothing at all about her. Five years is a long time, you know, and 'Liscord *v.* Liscord' was only one case, and that not a very important one, out of hundreds before and since. The guilty wife and her paramour seem to have disappeared off the face of the earth, as they generally do in these affairs. But we have managed to find out a lot about the man, and to trace his subsequent movements fairly completely. It seems he was a professional musician, a singer, and not a bad fellow as men go. But he had two vices—the old, old ones—gambling and drinking. So of course the marriage was a disastrous one from the silly girl's point of view—she was only a girl, you know, a pupil of his, not out of her teens, when Liscord ran away with her and married her."

Here Garth drew out a note-book and pored over it for a moment.

"But let me bring his story up to date, as far as

we know it. It appears Liscord went abroad almost immediately after the divorce case was finished, taking his little one-year-old son with him. Ferriday—you know, Rector, I have had to revise my judgment as to our lawyer friend's abilities since I had to do with him in this business : he has shown an almost uncanny cuteness here and there. Ferriday succeeded in getting into touch with one of the witnesses in the case, an old friend of Liscord's. And from this old friend we learnt that for some time Liscord travelled about from place to place in the Colonies doing fairly well at his profession, though his failings got worse, it seems. At last his health broke down, and he fell upon evil times. His friend began to receive from him letters asking for money, and giving the poorest accounts of his state. These letters ceased eventually, and the friend could tell us no more. In fact, Liscord had become rather a nuisance to him with his continual attempts to get money, and the friend was glad enough when the correspondence came to an end."

"Is that all the story?" I asked, for Garth had stopped and sat silently staring at the fire and puffing at his pipe.

"By no means," Garth returned, still staring at the blaze, wrinkles of perplexity now deeply lining his broad forehead. "So far, we had found out nothing that could help us more than very indirectly in our main object—to clear up the mystery of Liscord's violent end. But now we acquired several important pieces of information—again, I must own, entirely through Ferriday's cleverness as well as his industry and patience. We learnt what ship brought the man and child back from Australia. We know they landed at Southampton practically destitute, and that they tramped the whole way to Marshminster by road.

It came out in evidence, as you will remember, that the man was almost in rags. We know that when he left the boy at the lodging-house, Liscord covered the ten miles to Stavisham on foot, because at the time he could not pay the train fare, I suppose. We know he arrived at Stavisham about midday, that he stayed in the town until evening, and then set off to walk over the Down. The puzzle is, why did he do this, and do it so late in the day? And another question is, seeing that he was obviously so poor, how was it that when his dead body was discovered there were several pounds, a considerable sum for him, found in the pockets? Where did he get it from? Well, that is what Ferriday is now trying to find out. The trail is clear enough up to that point. But there it breaks. If we can only find out where he passed the four or five hours between his arrival in Stavisham and the time he started out for his lonely downland walk in the evening, we might have the master-key to the mystery. But it is just here we are at fault. It is a broken trail, and how to bridge the gap in it neither of us at present knows."

Linda had been listening eagerly, as she bent forward in her chair, her eyes fastened upon the speaker.

"How long ago was it, Mr. Garth, since the man's friend sent him the last sum of money?" she asked.

"Oh, a long time: a year or more," Garth replied.

"And yet he was able to pay the passage home for himself and the child?—he must have got money from somewhere else, then?"

"Ye—es."

"Someone either out there, or on this side?"

"Obviously."

"But almost every penny of this money was gone

when the two reached England? It had not been enough even to provide them with decent clothes?"

"That is how we reckon it out, Mrs. Benison."

Linda was warming to her subject.

"Then, assuming it to be correct, you have at once got a likely motive for what the man did next. Do not you think he knew of someone at a distance from the seaport where he landed, someone over in this direction, who might be willing or at least able to provide him with money, and that he was on his way to find that person when he met his death?"

"Go on," said Garth non-commitally.

"But I can't go on from that point. I must come back a little first. Come back to the morning of the day he reached Stavisham by road. Did no one see him on the highway? And if he lingered four or five hours in the town, as you say, surely lots of people must have seen him there."

"I agree," said Garth. "But, as our ill-luck would have it, the day was not the sort of day when a poorly-clad, seedy-looking individual would be noticed particularly. The annual horse-fair was being held, as you know, and the town itself and every approach to it were crowded with people and quadrupeds of all sorts, good and bad. No wonder we cannot find anyone in Stavisham who particularly remembers seeing a man answering to his description."

"There are several very low-class beer-houses in the place, Mr. Garth; have you enquired of them?"

"Every one," returned the Gargoyle Man, now treating my wife's interrogatory rather more seriously, I thought. "Every inn and hole and corner where liquor is sold. But we drew absolutely blank."

"Then," said Linda, a quaver of triumph in her voice, "then here is what looks like another footprint

or two to fill in the gap in your broken trail. Don't you see? You know the man was addicted to gambling and drinking. You know that these vices had reduced him to poverty and physical ruin. It is almost certain he reached Stavisham with little or no money. There he lingers half the day, seen of nobody. And yet when he is picked up dead on the lonely Down miles away next morning, quite a lot of money is found upon him; and the doctor who made the post-mortem examination declares there were evidences of his being in a state of partial intoxication at the time his death occurred. What do you make of all that, Mr. Garth?"

"What do I make of it?" echoed Garth, at a loss.

"Don't you see that Liscord must have been drinking and gaming in some low den all the time, probably with some disreputable crew he had picked up with on the road; and that the inn-keeper, whoever he was, is very naturally now keeping the fact dark for his own safety's sake!"

As this dialogue proceeded, I had become more and more impressed by the appositeness of what my wife was urging. But at that I could no longer contain myself.

"Well done, Linda!" I blurted out, and Garth immediately echoed the words, though his brows still knitted in their old perplexity.

"Well done; and so say I. But does Mrs. Benison take into account that this is a case of suspected murder? And would the most debased creature think only of his own petty interests when there was a criminal to be brought to book?"

"Of course he would," said I, before my wife could answer. "In this instance he would argue that the man could not be restored to life by his speaking; and, seeing that he himself was innocent, why should

he risk losing his licence, and with it his livelihood, by disclosing what shady doings he had permitted in his house?"

"But," objected Garth, "Mrs. Benison supposes a company of several people engaged in this secret gambling and drinking orgy. Would they also keep silence in face of the hue-and-cry?"

"Yes, and for a very good reason," returned Linda quietly. "We do not know what bad blood was up against my poor Cherry's father when he went away at last carrying their money with him. My belief is that at least one of the gang, knowing the lonely path he was to take, followed him, intending to get the money back by fair means or foul. Murder may not have been in his mind at the time. But he struck too hard. No, Mr. Garth; my advice to you is to put your pack into the cover again and try another draw. It is your only chance."

Garth sat long considering.

"It must lie," he said at last, paying out the words slowly, singly, like a soundsman telling his line—"it must lie between two, or three at most, of these little dark hovels of beer-houses tucked away up side-streets in this amazing old town of yours. I wonder if Ferriday—yes! I'll go and see him in the morning on my way to work. Ever so many thanks, Mrs. Benison, for your light in darkness! It is not the first time I have had to thank you for an illuminating word."

At that he looked up at the picture, and I saw Linda's glance follow his.

"Yes; and a word of courage too—just when it was sorely needed." He was paying out his words again in the same slow, pondering way, but in a very different tone. An indescribable, yearning tenderness

of mood had suddenly fallen upon him. "Of course we meet, Mrs. Benison, every now and again; and sometimes she passes, and sometimes stops to talk. But we get no farther, you know, or rather, I should say, no nearer. Latterly I have almost come to think we never shall."

"Faint heart!" Linda warned him.

"Ah! but the will to win the fair lady may sometimes be more than countervailed by sheer force of circumstances. Look at us, Mrs. Benison. We are so utterly unlike in temperament. Not a single taste in common—she so gloriously practical, a clever business woman, an intrepid rider to hounds, wits as sharp as a needle, and with it all so beautiful—well; the old Venetian artist would have done a lot better with his Diana up there if he had had her, the real thing, to paint from, instead of mere dreams. Now look at me!—a plain, sober-natured, cautious old hieland gillie, with his stern father's and gentle, sensitive mother's blood for ever at war within him, pulling him this way and that. But, thank God, the mother in him getting the best of it at last, and winning him the work he loves. Yet what is there in me that should attract a brilliant and beautiful woman like . . ."

He stopped. He could not even trust himself, it seemed, to utter her name. Linda bent forward in her chair.

"What the pair of you want, Mr. Garth," she said, in her serenest, quietest mood, "is a common interest, such as has linked up the most unlikely people in happy married life before now. And where no interest of the kind exists, it can be created by one or the other. I have seen it done, and done intentionally, over and over again."

Garth waved the tobacco-smoke away from before

his face the better to observe the speaker. He smiled rather grimly.

"Oh, Mrs. Benison! What? a self-taught, half-dragged-up son of the glens like me! She hates the very sight of sculpture; it is so cold and dead, she says. And it is the only thing in the world for me."

"Whatever you are, Mr. Garth, you have made a big success of it. My husband tells me you are famous in the church-builders' world. And every woman loves success in a man. That is something in the desired direction, don't you think? And, besides, a promise is a promise. I said I would help you in this, if I could, did I not? Well, I have not been idle. Valerie Thrapp and I have had many a little talk about you, and shall again, I expect—she is often at the Rectory now. Of course it is full early yet. But two things I can tell you. She has no sort of unfriendly feeling against you, not the slightest, as far as I can see. And"—Linda looked across at me then with absolute defiance in her dear true eyes—"and the question you asked my husband that morning when we met you on the Downs, and which he declined to answer, I can now answer on my own account. Not from anything definite she has said, but merely by piecing odd words of hers together, I am absolutely sure that there is no other man against you in the field."

Garth sprang to his feet.

"Oh, Mrs. Bension, how can I ever thank you! You have unloosed a hundred millstones from my neck. I can never—never——"

"Well, what do you think now of the 'common interest' idea?" Linda still maintained the defiant glance in my direction. The Gargoyle Man lifted helpless, eloquent hands to the roof.

"Are you fond of children, Mr. Garth?"

His keen eyes sparkled under their straight line of rufous brows.

"Fond of children, Mrs. Benison? Why, I simply worship them—ask any kid in the village-school."

"Come down to the Rectory, then, any day you are home, and have a walk in the garden with our Cherry. I know you are often in the village here for days together preparing your designs and that. And the more you come, the better my husband and I will like it. You will be always welcome at any hour, so choose your own times."

Garth looked at my wife with overbrimming gratitude, and also with shrewd understanding.

"Do you recommend any particular time?" he asked.

Linda hesitated. To my astonishment I saw her eyes blur, I could have sworn, with tears. But her voice was firm enough when she glanced up again at Garth's radiant face.

"Well, to begin with: come to-morrow morning about eleven," she said.

CHAPTER XVI

A SIEGE OF THE HEART

THE next morning, sitting, as had again become my wont, in my little sky-study reading and occasionally stretching my eyes by a look out of window, I was an unobserved spectator of the opening scene in a new drama which thenceforth staged itself on the Rectory boards from day to day, vastly to the entertainment of its little audience of four (the Odlings being included).

I did not hear Garth arrive. The first I saw of him, he was strolling across the garden-lawn below with Linda under the mild bright December sunshine which had followed the overnight storm, she having little Cherry on her other side. They passed out of view among the evergreens. The next time I caught sight of them they were still voyaging slowly along together, laughing and talking all three, but now Cherry was in the middle grasping a hand of each. The third and subsequent glimpses I got of the party, Linda had vanished. It was Garth and Cherry alone now, the great powerfully built man bending to the tiny slender slip of a boy as they went along hand in hand, Cherry's intent, upturned face shining in the morning sun—as struck me at the time—like the face of one of the new marble cherubim with which Garth was so bountifully peopling the sanctuary of Marshminster cathedral.

And while I gazed at this sight, a hand was laid lightly on my shoulder. I did not need to turn and see who had come into the room so softly that not a sound had I heard. I had grown to feel Linda's presence directly she came near me without the help of eyes and ears. For a minute or so we stood gazing out of the window together in silence.

"All promises well, so far," said Linda at last. "Malcolm Garth has made a really wonderful beginning with Cherry. He has started telling him stories: the most exciting and romantic tales about old Scottish highland life, full of battles between the clans, and chieftains besieging castles and rescuing distressed maidens from the hands of wicked abductors; and tales about young lairds hunting milk-white hinds that presently turn into beautiful ladies who marry their pursuers; and I don't know what else. Cherry was caught in the toils at once, and I soon found I was not wanted, so I came away and left them together. Oh, Frank! is not this a splendid idea of mine?—an inspiration! Why, they have not known each other half an hour, and here is Cherry already calling him Uncle Malcolm!"

All this said gaily enough, but with an odd sort of cæsura coming now and then in her clear quiet voice and making a husky break to the melody. I put my arm round Linda's waist without looking at her.

"Yes; I understand the deep-laid plot perfectly well. But it is rather early to triumph, is it not? We must wait and see how Valerie Thrapp takes it. Will she be down to-day, I wonder? Because if so—— Oh look, Linda! There she is: coming up over the paddock. Enter the leading lady; now we shall see the action of the play quicken up, I expect."

I too had spoken gaily enough. I drew Linda closer

to me. Together we watched the tall form of Valerie with its free grace of movement strapping along over the dew-soaked turf, until it reached the gate giving upon the garden. And here Valerie pulled up short, the gate half-open in her hand.

"She has seen them!" cried Linda. "They are in the little summer-house, you know, under the old chestnut-tree in the corner, where there are more stories going, I expect. Oh, what is she going to do!"

For Valerie, after standing a moment stock-still, evidently conning the situation, closed the gate again, and slowly turned to retrace her steps over the field. Linda uttered a little cry of disappointment.

"I must go, Frank!—go after her, and try to——"

"Stop, dearie! Look, look! There is Cherry off!"

The little lithe form in the pale-blue jersey emerged from the summer-house, face uplifted to the sun, arms outstretched. It shot across the lawn at amazing speed. Cherry's voice, shrill but extraordinarily sweet, pealed out as he went. "Auntie Valerie! Auntie Valerie! Oh, do come back, Auntie Valerie! Here is Uncle Malcolm come! Oh, don't go away, Auntie Valerie, *dear*!"

The last shrill word rose in a sort of sobbing, woeful adjuration. We saw Valerie stop, turn. At that moment Cherry made a false step. He stumbled and fell. Two figures sped from opposite points of the compass to his aid. Malcolm Garth and Valerie reached the prostrate youngster almost simultaneously, but Valerie was a shade the quicker. There she knelt a moment later, the sobbing child raised to his feet and clasped now in her two arms, with Garth standing and looking down upon the pair.

What words passed between them we were too far off to make out. For a minute or two the issue seemed

doubtful. But presently Valerie rose to her feet, and took Cherry by the hand. She made as if to lead him away. Cherry, however, though he kept willing hold of Aunt Valerie's hand, had no intention of losing his new-found uncle so soon, just in the middle of an exciting story about some enchanted castle, possibly. We saw him stretching back his free hand eagerly in the direction where he unerringly judged Garth to be standing. Again the high sweet voice rang up to us, clear as a silver bell.

" You come too, Uncle Malcolm ! Oh, do make him come, auntie dear ! There is plenty of room for three in the summer-house. And the fiery dragon was just dropping down out of the thunder-cloud and going to eat up the poor wounded Chief of the Isles unless the Fairy of the Golden Mountain got there first with her magic wand, you know, auntie, to change the dragon into—— Oh, what was it, Uncle Malcolm ? I do so want to——"

The words grew fainter and fainter as the three receded from us, until voice and triplet of figures gradually became indiscernible together as the little rustic arbour was gained. Linda threw both arms about my neck ecstatically.

" Oh, Frank ! It could not have turned out better, could it ? Oh, I am so glad ! Cherry has conquered her, as I knew he would. And now, if only they can become real friends again and—and——"

No summer day ever fell into sudden gloom before on-coming tempest as did Linda's joy then fall into tears. " Why, whatever is the matter, my dear, my dear ! " I cried in helpless bewilderment, as I gathered her into my arms, the only device I could think of for the nonce. I had been more than ready, for ever-present reasons of my own, to share her delight at the

initial success of her manœuvre. But how to follow her in this precipitate *volte-face* of emotion was more than I could conceive. The summer-storm passed, however, as swiftly as it came.

"Don't mind me, Frank dear! I shall get used to it in time, I know. But at first—— Oh, it is so hard, so hard! To lose him now, just when—when he and I were growing so dear to each other! Yet I knew it must turn out so, the first moment I thought of—of what you call my deep-laid plot. Oh, it all came to me then what must happen!"

"But why, *why*, should you lose the child, dear?"

Linda was long in answering.

"I have so much in my life, Frank, to thank God for. And she, she has nothing, nothing in the world—she has often told me so. Everyone she ever loved has been taken from her. But now, when this affection for little Cherry has sprung up in her heart, to save her from hardness and all evil, as she says; and if he really brings them together as we hope, how can I—— Oh, I know well she will want me to give him up to her! And how can I refuse?"

It was sheer noble, beautiful self-sacrifice in her, as I knew. But somehow, though I loved her at that moment more deeply, more reverently, than I had ever done, it made me very hot and uncomfortable, not to say a little angry.

"Nonsense, Linda! Why ever should you? There is such a thing as being too saintly good, too utterly self-forgetful, and this is it. I will never agree to what you say, whatever happens. Someone must think a little for you, if you will not think for yourself. Why, my dear, my dear! this little child has been sent straight into your life to comfort you in some measure for the outcome of my blind wicked folly in leaving you

alone all through those miserable years! Many a time since our marriage I have said that I shall never forgive myself for that. But now I see you so happy with the boy, so absorbed in his welfare, I have begun to think differently. If he has brought you mother's love, he has brought to me at last hope of self-forgiveness. Oh, my dearest wife, do not throw away what is proving such a wonderful gift from God to us both!"

Linda's hand stole into mine—what a frail hot little hand it seemed! She shook her head ever so slightly.

"Yes, I know how you must feel, Frank. It has been a happy, happy time for us, and nothing can take that away, can it? But it has not been all good; it has been very bad, in one way."

"What on earth——?" I began, when she stopped me.

"Frank, you know what a solemn, earnest resolve we made together—how our joint lives were to be wholly given up to the work of the Church here among your people? Oh, how happy I was to do that with you! And what a fine start we made, you and I together! How splendidly things went on for a little until—until Cherry came. But from that moment, dear, all has gone wrong for us both. It was my fault, Frank, wholly mine. I was not built for too much happiness, I think. The little taste of mother's love turned my head, and I began to forget and to neglect what I know I had been specially called to do. I let my love for the child and busy care for him steal away my time and keep me at home when I ought to have been out and doing a hundred things that were crying out to be done. And the worst of it is my negligence is making you negligent too. Look how you are slipping back, dear, into the old hermit ways all imperceptibly! What can you think of me who

promised to go before you into the thickest of the fight as your faithful standard-bearer! No! I was not good enough to bear more happiness like this. God tested me with it, but I have utterly broken down under the test. And now I know what is to happen! The child is to be taken away again—to punish me, yes! But for something else vastly more important—to restore us both wholly to the life's service we had promised and planned."

Listening to her, and loving her then more than ever, I had yet grown hotter and more ruefully uncomfortable with every word.

"Linda, it is all nothing but moonshine—sublime folly!" I urged, beginning to stride about the room. "You neglecting your work? Why, every day almost you are out and about in the parish doing as much, and more, indeed, than your strength will allow. You know it is true. I have really been secretly rejoicing of late that the need for looking after Cherry has kept you off your feet a little. He has been a blessing in that way. And long may he remain with us to put a much-needed curb on your perfectly quixotic notions of duty. To tell you the honest truth, I believe he has come only just in time to save you from real harm."

She let me fume and bluster along to my heart's content. When I had done, she rose quietly from her chair. She moved to the door.

"Well! I am not wanted this morning at any rate. I will go down to Toller's Rents where the measles are so bad, and work round by the cottages in River Lane, and home by Flint Alley, taking the Bunkles on the way. Steve is in bed, you know, with a ricked back—you ought to go and see him, dear. And if I've time I'll look in and find out why none of the Reeves children were at church on Sunday—more cough-

mixture and custards for Mrs. Odling to make, I expect. Don't wait lunch for me after half-past one."

I waved her despairfully away, and sat down again to my book. I read perhaps a couple of pages with a fierce attempt at concentration, in no wise, however, remembering a word. And then I flung the book away. A minute later, I was down in the hall hastily putting on my thickest boots and gaiters. There was Brent Barn with its huddle of poor cottages—a kind of outpost of the Marks' farm half a mile up the river—where I had not been for ages. I would show Linda she was not the only one with a sense of duty; though that did not necessarily mean in a parson neglect of all the pleasanter, more studious, calls of the life. The house-door slammed viciously behind me as I set forth; it must have slammed itself, for there was no wind that golden December morning. Is there not sometimes, I have often wondered, a real spirit of malevolent provocation in so-called inanimate things?

. . . . .

But that night I struck my colours to Linda, for good and all. I was lying awake in the darkness, listening to the great brown owls to-whit-to-whooing far and near around the old house, when it suddenly came over me that she was waking too. Softly I uttered her name.

"Linda!"

"Yes, dear Frank."

"Ah! I thought so. And it won't do, you know. You can't work all day and think all night—flesh and blood will not stand it."

She laughed ever so softly—that little low rill of laughter of hers that always moved me so strangely.

"Did you wake yourself up to tell me that?"

"N-no. I have not been to sleep at all yet. The

fact is I—— Linda, I was turning over in my mind something I meant to say to you on the morrow. But I may as well say it now, since we are both awake. Dearie, I am sorry I was such a beast to you this morning. I know I was wrong, and you were right all the time."

For a while she kept silence. And then the little low pondering rill of laughter came again.

"You were hard, Frank. But not on me. It was upon yourself, dear. You do not need any self-forgiveness. You spoke of this long separation that has been in our lives as something for which you were to blame. But I have come to think of that in a different light. It was so ordained for us, Frank. I believe now that, from the very beginning, God had set us work to do together for Him. But if He had let us marry and gather round us a happy home with children to love and care for, and all the anxieties of their bringing up to absorb our time and energies, that work would never have been done. So our lives were parted, and they have been brought together again only after long years when we are older and wiser and less selfish. Do not you see? If I had had my own way, Frank, in those old days when you were all the world to me, I might have never—— No, no, I can see it so plainly now! We had been chosen for His service alone—that only. We were to be just doers of His will and nothing more. And He knew that the only way we could learn to do His will was by separation. It was no act of yours—this parting of our lives. It was all God's doing for our truest happiness in the end."

The old cedar-tree outside the window creaked its branches in the faint night-wind The owls kept up their melancholy song to and fro across the garden. Yes, I could see—in some fashion at least. But I did

not
and w
in the
service, bu
hearten them to
blame lay.

"Dear!" said I, pu
the pillow in the darkness
carried to warm quivering lips
rade of mine! I know. I see. You were ready.
But I, God help me!—I was not ready. Therein lay
my fault—my sin. Linda, I am ready now; no man
was ever readier. And from now onward you shall
have the ruling and portioning of our joint lives. All
the pain and sorrow of this past long time of solitude
have been yours alone to bear. The upper hand in
this service of ours now belongs to you by right as well
as might. You shall do with me in these coming years,
few or many that may be left to me, just what you
will."

CHAPTER XVII

"LOVE SEEKETH NOT ITS OWN"

THERE was much sickness in Fairthorne about that time, a sort of epidemic of minor ailments of little account in themselves, yet numerous enough to keep Linda and myself and Mrs. Odling away from home a great deal of each day on errands of comfort, both material and spiritual, to the various sufferers near and far.

During this time Cherry was of necessity left pretty much to his own devices, and Linda was really glad that, as circumstances were shaping themselves between Valerie and the Gargoyle Man, he was not likely to want for companionship.

Coming home in the twilight of one raw chill evening, tired after a long day's round, and happening to pass by Blue-Bottles, my eye caught the red glow of a pipe, evidently Garth's, over the top of the gate, and [illegible] weary feet a moment. I had [illegible] his first

I have not heard more than a word or two about how you got on after that."

Garth smoked on in placid silence for a bit. He then gave forth a deep chuckle.

"If you had asked me only a few hours ago," he said, "I should have told you the whole scheme had turned out a failure. We had a very frigid time in the summer-house, an arctic twenty minutes or so, and then off she went with a hug for Cherry but nothing more than a soul-freezing nod for me. That was four days ago, and Mrs. Benison told me this afternoon she had not been near the place since. But just as Cherry and I were starting off for a walk, she turned up. Rector, if you had seen the look on her face, you would not have given much for my chance this side of Doomsday. But Mrs. Benison, bless her!—how wonderful she is! In a minute or two she had got us all happy and smiling, and it ended by Cherry carrying us both off for a long ramble over the Downs and back to tea. Wherever had you got to at tea-time, Rector? Out reading a good book to some old crone, I expect. Well, anyway, the ice is distinctly on the thaw now—Mrs. Benison's doing again, may the guid Lord square it up right for her some day!—and Mistress Valerie went away promising—— Ah, but there's the rift in the lute! It is this riding business that is worrying me now. They are off together to-morrow, she and Cherry, and I shall get left behind, don't you understand? No doubt that is what she is counting upon."

"You have good stabling here. Why do you not get a horse for yourself? You can ride, I suppose?"

"Lived in the saddle, almost, when I was a boy. But that is a long time ago, and——"

"Never mind. Take to it again. It is your clear policy. Another common interest, don't you see?"

Garth laid a grateful hand on my shoulder in the darkness.

"What a real helpful couple you are!" he cried. "By George! I will!"

He struck a match, but not to light his pipe. It was to look at his watch.

"I am expecting a visitor," he explained, "Ferriday: he has gone up to the Manor to see Sir Andrew Admington on business, and promised to look in here on his way home. I wonder if he will have any news about our Downland Mystery. You know, I told him all that Mrs. Benison said as to the necessity for finding the inn where she supposes poor Liscord passed his time on that day in Stavisham, and Ferriday was really impressed by her arguments. He has been very hot on the scent ever since. He quite believes now that there is a conspiracy to hush the thing up, for the reasons your wife gave, but swears he will ferret it out somehow. And I think he will, if 'dogged does it,' as the saying is. By the way——"

He paused so long after the final three words that I was fain at last to help him out.

"By the way—what?"

"You are rather chary of answering questions, Rector, I know. But there is one I should like to put to you nevertheless. Why is it that Ferriday seems to owe Miss Thrapp such a bitter grudge?"

It was my turn then to hesitate. Finally I met question by question.

"Does he seem to owe her a grudge?"

"Why yes; and that is what is fairly puzzling me. If ever I saw one human being obsessed by bitter bad feelings against another human being it is this lawyer-man against Valerie Thrapp. What can be the cause of it? I feel I must find out, and you will guess why.

Seeing that the very dust on her boots is worth more to me than guinea-gold, I cannot bear that anyone should think ill of her, even the slightest. Her enemies must be my enemies. Not that Ferriday has said a word against her that anyone can get hold of. He is far too cautious for that. But all the same, I know the very sound of her name is rank poison to him. And I must find out why."

We both paused then, looking at each other as well as we could in the darkness. I saw my way at last.

"I think, Garth," said I, "you have over-estimated one thing, and under-estimated another. You are very likely, in your present frame of mind towards Miss Thrapp, to be much too sensitive—to magnify the import of any chance word this very unsubtle person may have let fall without his intending it to be in any way disparaging. And on the other hand, I think you have under-estimated something that probably accounts altogether for the notion about Ferriday which you have got into your head—I mean the peculiar nature of their business relationship."

"Their what?" exclaimed Garth, wonderingly.

"Certainly. Don't you know? Ferriday is agent for all Sir Andrew's house-property in Stavisham, and has been for many years. He must derive at least half his income from the rent-collecting and other things he does for the estate. Sir Andrew has been the making of him, in fact. Oh, yes; Ferriday has his bread well buttered in that direction. And bearing this in mind——"

Garth caught me up.

"I see! And Miss Thrapp being Sir Andrew's bailiff and confidential adviser and all that, Ferriday might very easily have got the fancy into his deep but very thick head that she had grown to dislike him in some

way, and was trying to oust him from Sir Andrew's favour?"

"It is not improbable. On all these big establishments employing many people, you see the old servitors covertly jealous and suspicious of the new ones. Miss Thrapp is comparatively a newcomer, you know. I think you have about hit the right nail on the head."

At that moment I made out the glimmer of an approaching light, evidently Ferriday's bicycle-lamp, between the distant hedgerows of the lane.

"Here he comes!" said I, moving off, "and I have no particular wish to meet him. Good-bye! Don't forget you are always welcome at the Rectory."

On reaching home the first I heard was Cherry's voice calling my name. From the hall I could see him and Mrs. Odling standing at the top of the stair: Cherry in his white nightgear showing beneath a dressing-gown of scarlet flannel; Mrs. Odling with a candle in her hand and an affectionately severe expression on her face.

"He wunt go to chee, Rector," she called down to me, "not till Mrs. Benison comes home. Every time the door-bell goes, out o' bed he be and running to find out who 'tis. And he wunt believe what I tell un allays happens to naughty boys as wunt go to chee: how a gurt big bear——"

Cherry's shrill distressful tones cut short this harangue.

"Oh, do let me come down, Uncle Frank, and wait for her with you! I am so miser-a-bull!"

He drew the last syllable out into such a pitiful wail, that I was up the stairs and had the little figure fast in my arms in a moment.

"Yes; let him sit up just for once, Mrs. Odling,

until she comes back. I will look after him all right. He will be good enough with me."

Without waiting for Mrs. Odling's acquiescence, I bore him down the long flight and into the warm cosy dining-room, his little arms, from sheer joy, taking a perfect strangle-hold about my neck. I got his chair close to the fire, and there he sat a while in mute blissful content holding his hands out towards the cheery blaze. From my own chair hard by, I watched him, thinking of many things.

First, it came home to me in that quiet moment more deeply than it had ever done before, that it would be no less than a wicked act if I allowed Linda to part with the child under any conceivable circumstances. After all, who was Valerie Thrapp that I should set her happiness before Linda's? I had been weak with Valerie in the past, I too well knew. Her constant attentions had stirred my vanity, stirred even deeper feelings than that, more often than it now gave me peace to remember. But at the worst, my conscience, though it rightly blamed me as priest had no cause to arraign me as man of honour. Neither by actual word or actual deed had I ever given Valerie reason to believe that I thought of her more than as friend. I had spoken the pure truth when I told her I never had the faintest suspicion of her own feelings toward myself being different from mine towards her.

As for the tittle-tattle about the place, it was beneath contempt That would certainly receive its effectual quietus if Valerie and Malcolm Garth could be brought together. But I would give such a motive not a single instant's thought again. Far stronger within me—I said to myself as I watched the child—was a real desire to see Valerie happy for her own sake. With a nature such as hers, the danger of a hopeless love was that its

hopelessness might spread like a canker through her whole being, and bring about real ruin of heart. Well, there was only one cure for it that I knew of—another attachment. Like cures like in love. Over and over again I had seen it come about so, and why not here? But not at my dear wife's cost! It should never be! All my art and power and prayer should be used against such self-pitiless altruism.

Cherry turned in his chair—turned his happy face in my direction as though he could see me. He made a wonderful picture in the sidelong glow from the fire, and my heart went straight out to him. The little round face with its delicately-chiselled features, its cleft dainty chin and straight fair brows, shock of flaxen hair arching away from the blue-veined temples, the sightless eyes in no way repulsive, beautiful even in their large opalescent pallor—I conned over his fine points like a virtuoso over a priceless Cloisonné vase. And then I did something I had never done before, hugely surprising and a little alarming myself. I held out my arms and cried to him as eagerly as Linda might have done.

"Come, Cherry!"

The bird spread its white and scarlet wings, and in a moment had settled on my breast. I fell to fondling him, a mist across my eyes so that the little face blurred for an instant.

Alas for our motives, even in what seems to us our noblest, purest deeds! It came to me then in a flash that I had been thinking as much of myself as of Linda when I had cast behind me in such a spate of virtuous indignation the temptation to further this scheme of hers. And as the humbling realisation of this fell upon me, the child grew restless in my arms. He sat up, a shadow of perplexity knitting the straight fine

brows. He began to pass wandering, questioning hands over my face.

"You are sorry, Uncle Frank," said he, the little lithe hot fingers checking at the corners of my mouth. "What makes you sorry?"

"We are both sorry, dear, I think. We want her to come home, don't we? We cannot bear her to be away from us out in the cold and dark even for a little while. I wonder what keeps her so long, Cherry. I can't think, can you?"

"I know, Uncle Frank. It is the rheumatisms, and all the bad legs and measles and colds and things. Oh, she told me all their names and I promised—I did promise, Uncle. Only I—I couldn't. I was so dreadful lonesome in bed, and—and——"

"Never mind about that, Cherry," I interposed hastily, perceiving a possible return of the miserable mood. "We will just wait and be as happy as we can. What shall we talk about? Do you know what is coming in a week or two?"

He thought a moment, then yawned, politely putting his hand before his mouth. He shook his head.

"Christmas, isn't it, Cherry? And Lady Admington is going to give a party to all the village children down in the schoolroom, with a great Christmas tree loaded up to the top with toys and little coloured wax-candles—you shall be there, and you will be able to see the tree. It will make such a blaze of light. Oh, we will have a fine time, I can tell you!"

He gave a little quick jerk of delighted laughter.

"Christmas? Oh yes! But not yet, is it, uncle? It is so cold now and Christmas is always hot, you know."

"Ah, it is so in the country you come from. But not in England, Cherry. Here Christmas is the time

for ice and snow and cold winds. You will like it much better so."

I would have rambled on at great length in this strain, but suddenly became aware that the child was not attending to me. He was sitting now bolt upright on my knee, his head thrown back, the gold-fringed eyelids sweeping the pale cheeks, his arms drooping flaccidly at his sides. He appeared to have gone off in a deep reverie over something—almost a kind of trance, it seemed. An uneasy feeling gripped me.

"Christmas—I remember." The pondering words came on ever so light a breath. "Christmas, and such a terrible hot wind blowing, blowing. And my father so—so ill, and both of us so hungry and so tired. A great big street full of happy people shouting and laughing, and pushing us about, and horses and carriages running by us all the time. Such a great big happy noise keeping on and on. And then we stopped, and my father—he tried to—to——"

The slow hesitating words died down into silence. A shudder ran through the little form upon my knee. I felt my heart stand still with an eerie wonder.

"What did your father try to do, Cherry?" I cried to him, fascinated, yet horrified, at the thought of a mere baby talking like this.

"Oh, but he couldn't! He tried and tried, but he was so ill. The words came too thick. And then I—— He told me to sing for him. And I sang. And the people stopped talking for a long, long while. And then the money falling all round us!—lots and lots of money. Oh, he was so glad—my father, and we had such lots to eat that night, and——"

He stopped—shook himself. It seemed as if he had suddenly wakened from sleep. He fell to blinking his blind eyes and smiling dazedly. The little hands rose

and began again their old wandering investigation of my face. Apparently he was quite satisfied with what his finger-tips revealed to him, for he soon settled down again into my arms with a little crooning comfortable sound of relief. The yawn tripped him up again, and again was politely suppressed. A minute later, I knew from his soft regular breathing that he was really asleep.

Thus Linda found us when, half an hour later, she came home weary enough from her long round, but happy, even elated, at all she had accomplished. I managed, under her adroit step-by-step leadership, to carry Cherry upstairs and lower him gently into his cot without rousing him from the deep slumber into which he had fallen. When this had been successfully accomplished, and we were sitting cosily by the fire together after the evening meal, I ventured, not without some misgivings as to the wisdom of it, to relate to her Cherry's Christmas story and the manner of its delivery.

"He will need ever so careful watching and training for the next few years," she said when I had done. "No doubt latterly his poor father must have come down to be nothing better than a tramp, going about from place to place with the boy and picking up a living by singing in the streets. The life ruined the father's health, or what of his health and strength drink had not destroyed, and the child has not escaped. His brain and nerves have been unnaturally overstrained—I have seen it in numberless little ways. But if only he is well looked after now, and above all, properly fed——"

"All the more reason," I put in, seeing my opportunity, "for your keeping him close by your side during these next years. His whole life's well-being, body

and mind, depend on you, dear. And if ever you committed the folly of letting him go from you——"

"Mother's love—that is all he wants," she answered me slowly, steadily, her eyes filling nevertheless. "I love him very dearly, God knows. You and he together—you make up all the world for me. But oh, Frank! day by day it is being slowly forced upon me that she, Valerie, loves him even more than I do. She is a stronger nature. The greater the strength, the greater the need. And if—— Oh, my darling! 'Love seeketh not its own.' If I must give him up, I know I can do it. Just as, to a greater love, I could even give up—yes! I could give up even you."

CHAPTER XVIII

A LEE SHORE

LINDA had no cause to complain of me that busy fortnight culminating in Lady Admington's Christmas party given annually to the school-children of Fairthorne and surrounding isolated hamlets.

That proved the busiest Christmastide in all my life. Though, when the news got round that the event was duly to come off despite the many cases of sickness in the village, most of the ailing children made an astonishing recovery, the old folk held on obstinately to their troubles; and my wife and I were kept running to and fro pretty much all day and every day, straining the resources of the Sick and Poor Fund, as usual, well beyond their visible limits. But the Squire and his lady rose nobly to the occasion in the matter of cash, while Garth surprised me by sending repeatedly generous contributions for the same object, and this in spite of the fact that the horse I had suggested had been bought and was now stalled at Blue-Bottles: a fine big black hunter—'Hieland Laddie' as the Gargoyle Man promptly named him—with plenty of bone and muscle, as indeed was needed for his owner's height and weight.

Sometimes Linda and I scoured the narrow ways of the village and miry tracks of the surrounding country-

side in company. But more often our errands lay in different directions, and frequently all day through we met only at mealtimes for a hasty bite, then out again on our several ways.

Cherry, however, suffered no neglect during this period. When he was not with Mrs. Odling in the kitchen, or tagging along behind William Odling on various enterprises of garden and poultry-yard, or in some odd nook alone at his old pastime of playing with the sunbeams and crooning softly to himself in that shrill, sweet, vibrant voice of his, he was out with either Valerie or the Gargoyle Man or both, either mounted or on foot.

I saw little of them myself, beyond an occasional glimpse or passing word, throughout all this busy fortnight that steadily gathered momentum until it hurled us all into the joyful maelstrom of Christmas. But whenever Linda and I contrived a few minutes together, she generally had some item of news to report from which I gathered that Garth was slowly but surely gaining way. One morning it happened that we had each come home early to scramble a hasty lunch, it being extremely dubious whether either would be able to return again until dark. I found Linda in her thick coat and foul-weather headgear standing in the doorway consuming biscuits and thoughtfully watching the first snowflakes of an obviously imminent storm sidling heavily and slowly to earth. We stood a moment side by side dipping into the same tin together and conning the inky sky above.

"Yes, it is coming at last, and in real earnest," said I, "and you must not dream of venturing far from home. Where have you got to go to next?"

"Where have you?" she returned, with that touch of gentle defiance in her tone which I had learned to

associate with any scheme of hers that she knew would rouse my opposition.

"I?—only to Dingle Bottom. Old Linchett, he gets no better, and——"

"Cannot you leave it till to-morrow, Frank? Right across the open Down against all this wind and snow!"

"I know. But that does not answer my question. Do tell me, Linda. You are making me really anxious. You should keep days like this for merely pottering about from door to door."

"Yes, and I know too. Good gracious, Frank! What would people think of the Rector's wife if she showed herself afraid of a snowflake or two and a little wind while the Rector himself was out in all weathers? You have married me, dear, and you must put up with me. Good-bye!—I shall be home before you, I expect."

And with that, and a merry laugh to match it, she picked up her basket and made off through the whirling snow. I stood looking after her until she vanished at the garden-gate, and then turned up my coat-collar and pulled my hat down over my eyes, preparatory to setting forth on my own far from pleasant journey. Mrs. Odling's voice sounded in my rear.

"Ye've let her go, then, Rector? For a farden's worth o' pins, I'd say 'Shame on ye!' Sech a day, to be sure an' all! Where be your head, sir, let aloane your heart?"

"What else could I do, Mrs. Odling?" I dismally remonstrated, one shoulder out in the weather. "It is all very well to talk. But did you ever succeed in stopping her when she had made up her mind to a thing? Come now!"

Mrs. Odling stood a while glumly staring up into the sky dark with its avalanche of descending flakes. The point was incontestable, as she well knew.

"But she'll never stand it—not for long, Rector," she groaned at last. "Just a pretty thread-paper full o' 'lectricity; that's what she be, God bless her! And when 'tis all flashed off—what then? You mark my words—we'll ha' trouble wi' her, Rector, afore we be many months oulder." Mrs. Odling glowered at me as though I were a pedlar trying to sell her some trash, with his foot in the door. "Oh, don't tell me! I ha' no patience!" she cried hotly, and flounced off back into the house.

But when I got home just at dusk, and had softly opened the sitting-room door unobserved by its two occupants, Linda, upon whom my gaze first fell, presented as reassuring a picture as I could have wished for. I could detect no trace about her of the hard and trying day she must have undergone. Her eyes were bright, her cheeks aglow, her pretty silvered brown hair swept back from her forehead in more voluminous ripples than ever. She was sewing serenely at the spread tea-table under the rosy light of the lamp, and before the fire knelt Cherry in a blue linen smock holding up two slippers to warm. Though he could not see me, he was the first to detect my presence. He sang out delightedly.

"Uncle Frank! Here he is at last, mother! Come and sit in your chair, uncle, and I'll take off your wet boots for you! Now we can have tea, mother dear, can't we? Hurrah! just we three all by ourselves!"

"He has been holding your slippers to the fire this last half-hour," explained Linda, carefully measuring out the one-and-three-quarter spoonfuls which was the regulation charge for our old silver pot when no company was at hand. "You shall have your tea in your easy-chair by the fire as you have had such a tramp of it, and Cherry and I will serve you—won't we, Cherry

darling? We must spoil him a little these trying times. Mind the mud on your clean pinafore, child!"

Luxuriously I lay back in the chair submitting myself to the unbooting operation. No human being with eyes, old or young, could have performed it with swifter, surer dexterity than did this sightless child kneeling before me, his grave intent face uplifted, the little fingers flying to the task. When he had done, I bent and kissed him. "Never, never will I let you go!" I vowed to myself, smothering the words in his mop of dense fair hair as I lifted and carried him to his seat at the table. "You have done some foolish things in your life, Francis Streatley Benison, Rector of Fairthorne in the County of Sussex. But if you allow this stupendously inane thing to come to pass—well!" There was no word in any language, living or dead, with which I was familiar that could be taken as a sufficiently powerful epithet for the sort of man I should become in my own eyes under the circumstances imagined. I gave it up and went back to my chair, where I was instantly assailed with smoking hot tea and buttered toast.

Cherry did most of the talking throughout the meal. His mind ran incessantly on the approaching treat to the school-children.

"Auntie Valerie has bought all the toys and things," he told us, between mouthfuls, "a wagonful of them, she says. And there are to be hundreds and hundreds of cakes and oranges. And the brass-band from Ashbury for the dancing and musical-chairs. And oh, what do you think, Uncle!—a real Father Christmas is coming!—coming in a sleigh and bells to give the toys away. And who do you think it will be?—Uncle Malcolm! There!"

I expressed more astonishment at this item of news

than I felt. Garth was playing the game with a bold and adroit hand indeed, and I could but wish him the best of luck in it. Linda looked across at me with a gleam of triumph in her eyes.

"That was my doing," she said. "Lady Admington and Valerie had arranged it between them that one of the under-footmen should take the post. But I told Lady Admington that it would never do for Father Christmas to have a turned-up nose and drop his aitches. Then she said no one else could be spared at such a busy time. And that gave me my chance. Of course I suggested Malcolm Garth. I knew he would be home all the week, as the cathedral work was to be suspended for the holidays. I must say Valerie heaped up in the road all the difficulties she could think of, but I got my way in the end."

Our cosy little family tea reached its close at last, and then the three of us had romps together in the firelight. And then Linda undressed Cherry while I read to them the story of the shepherds keeping their watch by night over the temple flocks. And then we sang together one or two of the old, old carols: "Good King Wenceslas" and "God rest ye, merry gentlemen" and "Christ is born in Bethlehem," until neither Linda nor I could find voice for another line against the thrilling, heart-disturbing sweetness of the voice of the child. Finally she bore Cherry off to bed wreathed in sleepy smiles, and left me to stand before the fire and fill my pipe, the while I listened to the spit of the snow that came down the chimney on the glowing embers, and thanked God for all the good gifts He had showered into my thankless life.

Linda had returned to the comfortable room and taken up her sewing again, and we were exchanging congratulations on the fact that, as far as we knew,

neither of us would have to turn out again that inclement night, when the house-door bell sounded. We looked at each other blankly.

"Whoever can it be in this weather, Frank?"

"Conf—— What a nuisance! Just as we were settling down so cosily for a long quiet evening together! Whyever cannot people wait until——"

"Hush, dear! Listen! Whoever it is, Mrs. Odling has asked them in. It can't be helped, you know. Perhaps someone has been taken ill and——"

But our speculations were brought to an end by the appearance of Mrs. Odling in the room. She closed the door carefully behind her.

"'Tis Miss Thrapp from the Manor. 'A warnts to see you, ma'am! Very particular, she says. Waitin' in the drawing-room, she be." Mrs. Odling stopped abruptly. "Drat her!" she added, and viciously set her teeth.

"What!—in the cold room? Oh, ask her in here, Mrs. Odling, at once. You won't mind, Frank dear, will you? We cannot let her freeze."

But Linda did not wait for Mrs. Odling's compliance, and mine was taken for granted. She was out of the room in a trice, and returned next moment pushing Valerie Thrapp in before her, Valerie's furs powdered from head to foot with snow.

Valerie appeared disconcerted at seeing me. There was a hesitation underlying the friendliness of her greeting to us both, as Linda with ready hospitality helped her to remove her wraps and got her into a warm seat by the fire.

"I thought you would be alone, dear Mrs. Benison," she said, her hesitant manner rather increasing than diminishing. "I believed the Rector had been asked to preach in Stavisham Church this evening, and——"

"Not to-night—to-morrow night," I explained. "The published date has been changed, luckily for me."

I saw a curious look of disappointment come into her face. Obviously she had braved the storm with the intention of having Linda to herself for some purpose or other, but what it was I could not yet divine. We all three then plunged into various small topics appertaining to the parish. Yet, in spite of her ready, even redundant talk, I could see that Valerie was still as preoccupied and ill at ease as ever. Finally I caught Linda's eye—how long she had been trying to attract my attention I do not know. I rose to leave the room. But now Valerie herself stopped me.

"I don't want you to go," said she, "and this is only nonsense we are talking. You must both guess that I should not have come through those dark lanes alone on such a night if I had not wanted to come badly. No, I want you to stop now and hear, Rector." Her manner suddenly changed. "Oh, Mrs. Benison—Linda—dear friend! you are both making me very, very unhappy! Why could you not let things go on in the old way—you and I and Cherry together? All the beautiful walks and talks and rides!—and just letting me, in your goodness, be with the child, and get back through him a little of all the hope and peace that had gone from my life, I thought for ever? Oh, Linda, why bring this huge Scotch stone-chopping man into my little heaven to destroy it all? Oh, I cannot bear it, I cannot bear it!"

To the utter surprise and concern of us both, here she miserably broke down into weeping—convulsively, wildly—burying her face in her hands. In a moment Linda had her arms around the sobbing girl.

"He is a great and a good man. And he loves you

with such a love as any woman may be proud of, and grateful for." The words were said very quietly close to Valerie's ear. "Tell me why you turn against him so. Of course I have seen that you do so, and have long seen it. But why do you do it, Valerie? It is a perfect mystery to us both. Is it because Mr. Garth has grown to love the boy too? Is it only jealousy then?"

"Jealousy!"

Valerie lifted her streaming face to Linda's for a moment, then dropped it again into her hands.

"Jealousy! Why should I be jealous when you are not? It is you who have cause for that, not I!"

Linda seemed to be thinking something out.

"But with you, dear, it *is* jealousy, is it not? What else can——"

Valerie stopped her with a sort of strangled cry that seemed not uttered but wrung from her.

"You are right! I am wickedly, madly jealous of him. He is drawing my darling Cherry's love away from me. Already the boy can talk of scarce anyone else but Uncle Malcolm. In a little while—oh, I can see it coming!—I shall be nothing to him, and this man will be everything. Oh! what shall I do? How can I prevent it? Dear, dear friend! You alone can help me. The boy is yours—yours for life. No one has a right to come near him without your bidding. Can you not—— But no! I know I am mad to ask it of you. I must suffer again and lose all again! Yes, I was a fool to come to-night! I know what you are going to say—what your husband will say. Oh, you need not stab me with the words! And never fear! —I will not plague you with this any more. I—I will never speak of it again. Only—only I cannot stop in this place and suffer. I must go away. I dare not

remain near my lost darling—I am not strong enough—sooner or later I should do some mad thing, I know. Yes, I will go—to-morrow. Why not to-night? Why not—— Oh, why must I live at all? Life is not worth the pain it brings! I should be ever so much better off if I—if I had the courage to—to——"

"Hush!"

By force gentle but irresistible, Linda had got hold of one of the writhing hands and now held it between her own.

"Hush! That is sheer cowardice. God made you a true woman—be one then! Valerie, hold up your head. Look me in the eyes. Listen to what I say."

Again I saw that strange look, half pondering, half distraught, come into Linda's face. A sudden dread began to knock at my heart.

"Listen to me, Valerie dear. You are a young woman; I am an old one. And here is a child whom, because of his affliction, must be dependent on others to the day of his death. In the nature of things my love can go with him, to shield and guide him, only a little longer on his way. But your love—why, you and he are treading almost the same stretch of life's spring-time path together!—between your age and his there must be less than twenty years. Now listen! For his sake, for your sake, for the sake of one other—the good man who truly, deeply loves you and loves the child—this I will do. Oh, Valerie dear, hear what I am going to say and weigh my words carefully. It is this. Cherry shall be yours, wholly yours, from the day of your marriage to Malcolm Garth."

Did I utter that cry? Or was it only a louder, hoarser voice among the many wind-voices that were volleying round the old house that night? To this moment in which I write, I do not know. Be that as it may, they

had both started to their feet, and were looking intently at me.

"Linda, Linda! You—you cannot really——"

"Frank, you promised—remember! My will alone was to guide our joint lives. But I will hold you to your word in only this one thing. In this I must have my way."

I turned aside, throwing my hands up despairfully. And so I did not see her sink into her chair. When I looked round again, only Valerie stood erect, her bosom labouring, her great bright black eyes piercing me through and through. She never removed her gaze from mine as she spoke.

"Rector, you have heard. As my parish-priest, you know me as no one else does. At confession I have told you many things in these past years. Turn your mind back now on everything I have said, *everything*; on one thing above all that I confessed to you about myself and—and another only a few months back. Do you hear me? Have you done so now?"

She waited for my answer. I said no word, only steadily met her piercing gaze. But she would not go on until I had returned her ever so slight an inclination of the head.

"And now, with that thing fully in your mind, Rector, do you tell me to marry Malcolm Garth? Yes, or no?"

They both waited now—Linda ashen-faced in her chair, her white hand pressing her breast; Valerie hardly less pale under the bronze of her full cheeks. I got the words out at last.

"Valerie! Yes!"

She gave me one more piercing look.

"Then I will!" she said,

CHAPTER XIX

"THE FRIEND THAT STICKETH"

LINDA lay late the next morning, a thing I had never known her do before. I did not disturb her, but quietly dressed and went from the room, softly closing the door behind me.

I had a solitary breakfast that day, for Cherry, deprived of his usual reveilleuse and faithful tire-woman, also, no doubt, was still far away in some dim backwater of dreams. I must have eaten and drunk, but I do not remember doing either. A little later I found myself going down the snow-cumbered village street in the direction of the Spy House, mechanically returning the greetings of those I met, but conscious of little else that was external to my own troubled thoughts.

Though it was so early, I found Harriet Lisle gone to her work at the school, and Jane already at her eternal knitting in the great muslin-curtained window whence she kept such unremitting watch and ward over her little world of Fairthorne. To my exceeding discomposure, my old friend received me as though my last visit to her had been paid but yesterday instead of a whole month back, as I now recollected only too well.

"Somehow or other, I half-expected you this morning, Frank," said she, all the old affectionate

good-will brightening in her hollow weary eyes as she looked across at me stirring uneasily in my familiar chair in the window-corner. "When you preached anywhere away from the village, you always came to talk over the points of your sermon, didn't you? And I am afraid I often made you angry by stupidly honest suggestions. But to-day I will try——"

"Oh, it isn't that, Jane!"

I regretted the irritability of the words the moment they were spoken. I went on in a more chastened tone.

"No! it isn't that, my dear old friend. The fact is, I haven't given the Stavisham sermon more than a hasty thought yet, though it is to be delivered to-night. I want to talk to you about something quite different. I am worried to death, Jane! that's the solemn truth. Not, mind you, because things are going wrong in any part of my new life, but because they are now turning out only too well as I could wish them. And the more decidedly they improve, the more troubled I grow. Are you in the slightest degree getting the drift of my meaning?"

She went on knitting for a moment or two in silence. The quivering motion of the bright needles slowed until it ceased altogether. Jane lay back in her chair, the work discarded in her lap.

"Only, of course, by reading into what you say thoughts that are in my own mind," she returned at last. "Frank, you must do two things if I am to be any help to you as counsellor. You must be just to yourself, first. And you must be quite candid and open with me. You must keep back nothing. Tell me this one thing, to begin with. How far did matters really go between you and Valerie Thrapp before your marriage?"

I looked at her, indignant amazement at the question she put, and gratitude that she had had the insight to put it, contending in my mind for mastery. She had helped me over the stile indeed, but had let me down a terrible thump on the thither side of it.

"They did not go any way at all," I answered her, "at least, not what the world would call any way. I cannot explain to you exactly unless I use a hard and perhaps ungenerous and unmanly word against the girl. She simply *pursued* me. That is the only word. She never let an opportunity go by to come to me, or be with me on the smallest pretext. I know now why. But on my side——"

"She pursued you, you say. Pursued? That can only mean that you ran away and she followed."

"It is the wrong word then, Jane. But I have got into such a subtly vitiated state of mind that I am losing the very meaning of some words. No. I never ran away! Far from it. I am miserably, guiltily conscious I did much that a woman in her state of heart might take as encouragement. Not by any single deed or word, mind! But in manner perhaps; yes, and in look, I know—by many looks, I know. Oh, Jane! don't you see how it all was? I, a man growing old, and fast getting as dry of nature as the dead leaves in the ancient books I was forever turning. And she, a brilliant, hot-blooded, comely young woman, bent on showing me by every art and device of her sex—— But I did not yield a single hair'sbreadth to that, Jane, not in the sense the world understands yielding. And I swear to you that it never once crossed my mind what her real purpose was until——"

She made a curious impatient little movement of her two hands.

"Never mind that," she said. "That is stale

news, to me at least. Of course, knowing you as I know you, I can conceive no other way of it. But I do not know anyone else in Fairthorne who would not or has not, Frank. Though you may not have heard a shot, nor seen any smoke or dust flying, I can tell you I have been engaged in a pretty hot fight for you round about here ever since the day of your marriage."

I had guessed as much.

"I can well believe it," said I bitterly. "Cause or no cause, one can never silence slandering tongues."

"And what," she retorted, "have you done towards silencing them? For a few months my campaign looked to promise well. You and Valerie seemed to have agreed to keep away from each other. But now, they tell me, she is always at the Rectory, and——"

"Jane, you want me to be just to myself. That is none of my doing."

"But a straight word to the girl from you, Frank, would have——"

"Jane, she came there first, and comes there now, wholly by the express invitation and wish of my wife."

Jane Lisle took up her knitting again and made the needles fly for a few distressful, pondering moments.

"But what has happened now, Frank?" she asked at length.

"The very worst. I have done something to save the situation, though you may not think it. I have planned, and planned most ignobly. And now all my plans look as though they were to be translated into facts. I have won what I tried for, and—God help me!—I am infinitely distressed over it, and utterly ashamed."

"In the name of all that is wonderful, what is it you have planned and won?"

"Her marriage to Malcolm Garth."

"Oh!"

After the one low, long-drawn-out exclamation of amazement, Jane Lisle lay back mute in her chair, her eyes intently searching my face. And then just as low and long-drawn-out a laugh escaped her. It was much like the laugh of a child, a laugh of surprise and delight, blended with a glad relief.

"Oh, Frank! I might have guessed, knowing you so well of old! So this is your bad news, is it? This is what has brought you down here to me in sackcloth and ashes, with such a face of woe?" She laughed again with a more tremulous ring of relief and wonder than ever. "Don't look so puzzled, Frank, and so deeply hurt! Whatever is there in this to trouble you so? Isn't it the very best piece of good fortune that could have come into your life?"

"Into my life—yes. And into the life of her who is my wife and whom I dearly love—yes, and yes, and yes; assuredly. But what of Valerie? Oh, Jane! I have not told you the worst. I know that this old wretched infatuation is as strong upon her as ever. For Garth she has no love, not even liking. And yet she is going to do this thing: do it at—at my bidding. That is where all the shame of it comes in for me. She marries Malcolm Garth because I ha said 'Marry him!' Could one with any claim to be a man of honour stoop much lower than that against another man who has now become his friend?"

Jane Lisle had listened, the smile of happy wonder still lingering bright in her pain-worn eyes. But now her face grew suddenly stern.

"She does this just on your word?—from no other consideration?"

"I am not sure I understand you, Jane. But there is another—if that answers you. Linda has promised to give up Cherry to the pair on their wedding day."

"Why?—in God's name, why?"

It was as though a red-hot mailed hand had incontinently gripped my throat.

"Heaven alone knows!" I said, returning her just as stern a look as she gave. "Mere saint-like, self-sacrificing folly—nothing less. It will break Linda's heart, I know, and—and mine too. The boy has grown to be so much to us. And now we are to lose him. But there it is, Jane. She is as hard as adamant in this. Nothing that I can say will——"

"Then it is love for the child, perhaps more than love for you, that has decided Valerie in this? But why on earth should she be so fond of him?"

"Again I must say, Jane, 'Heaven alone knows.' It was the boy, undoubtedly, who was the attraction when she started coming to the Rectory once more. She has heaped all sorts of costly presents on him, and——"

"Yes, I know, I know! Everyone in the village knows it too, and a fine stroke you did for yourself in allowing it. That has made the hardest part of the fight for me. Dear good, simple old Mrs. Marks——" She stopped and bit her lip. The smile came back to her face. "But never mind dear good, simple, old Mrs. Marks. Here is something you have told me that will put the branks on her, and all like her, for ever. Frank!"

"Yes, Jane."

"I have called you some hard names in my time, have I not?"

"You have indeed!" said I feelingly.

"Well, put them all together now in one grand pæan of invective and you will know what I think of you at this present moment!"

I must have turned to her something like the face of the damned, for at that her self-restraint fairly broke down.

"Get your head out of the sand, man alive, and listen! You are saved, and this which is now providentially coming to pass is the only thing that could have saved you. This man Malcolm Garth, he worships the very ground Valerie treads on, does he not? And would he not give his ears, and his sackful of red hair, his great Scotch block of a head itself even, for just one kind look from her? And is not his one idea of heaven on earth to have her for his wife?"

I agreed dismally.

"Well then, stop thinking and talking nonsense, and accept your deliverance with gratitude. What sort of dishonour is this you do him—by winning him his heart's desire—you, the only man in the world that can do it? Why, he will come to you barefoot and go down before you in gratitude as to a king! And as for Valerie—Frank, Frank! Have you learned nothing about feminine human nature in all these long years? Do you not know that this feeling which she calls love for you is just the aching void which all young unattached women have, and is capable of being filled by one man as well as another? You have nothing to fear: still less anything to reproach yourself with on her account. My advice to you is, let events take their course and be thankful. She will have got the child, and more to come, no doubt, and got a husband who will love and care for her to her life's end. What more can

year or two
which she bears yo... ...r her past
folly, and perhaps a little shame.

A little later I was trudging homeward through the white dumb ways of the village ruminating deeply over Jane Lisle's words. Though my talk with her had in no sense lightened the burden of blame which I knew had been justly laid upon me, I could not help seeing the wise expediency of her view. It was better for all concerned that events should be left to take the direction they now seemed shaping for, and further meddling with them on my part might only add to the mischief already achieved. Not one grain of comfort, of course, did I extract, or seek to extract from this conclusion. But the more my heart smote me, the more my reason urged upon me the probability that, left to take their present trend, things would contrive to work together for more lasting good to all then even now I could foresee.

I said this to myself as I turned into the Rectory gates. I said it again as I hung my hat and coat up in the hall and started to mount the old stairway, intending to find out whether Linda had yet finished her sleep out. Half way up I encountered Mrs. Odling.

"Where be going, Reverend?" she asked, a queer look upon her face.

"Oh! just to see whether she is awake yet, Mrs Odling. I will not make a sound—only just peep in and——"

"Awake!" Mrs. Odling gave vent to a despairing snort. "Awake, says you! Why, she be up and gone out wi' her basket this hour foreby!"

CHAPTER XX

BLIND-MAN'S-BUFF

THE great day of the children's Christmas party came round at last.

I was a little late in getting down to the schoolroom on that evening, and I found the long-awaited festivities already at their height. The large vaulted room was brilliantly illuminated, and profusely adorned with evergreens and flags and an infinity of coloured paper-chains which the schoolchildren had been making for weeks past. At one end towered the Christmas-tree hung to its topmost twig with all manner of toys and tinsel ornaments, and innumerable as yet unlighted candles, with the queen-doll in white silk and silver enthroned at a giddy altitude up among the rafters of the roof.

At the other end of the crowded building on a raised dais was stationed the Ashbury Brass Band blowing and thumping its hardest. The whole floor between was occupied by a seething, laughing medley of children, while round the walls on every side sat mothers in their Sunday best with babies in their arms, and grave fathers in unwonted stiff linen collars mostly holding on their knees the smaller children of years too tender yet to warrant their inclusion in the rough-and-tumble of the general throng.

I stood by the door awhile to look about me. I had not seen Linda since breakfast-time, she having been down at the schoolroom most of the day helping to prepare for the coming fête. I descried her at last in the midst of the crowd of hilarious little ones superintending, with Valerie and half-a-dozen other flustered yet very happy ladies young and old, the various games that were in progress in all parts of the room.

Garth was there, of course; I saw him at once. He stood head and shoulders above everyone else in the room except Valerie Thrapp. He was down at the far end in the midst of a mob of the older boys who were throwing rubber balls at a huge gaudily painted figure with enormous mouth, every thrower whose ball entered the mouth being rewarded with a coin from an apparently inexhaustible bag carried by Garth.

But Cherry I could not locate for some considerable time. At length my eye lit upon two little figures some way off—a boy and girl, sitting side by side on one of the high window-ledges well up out of harm's way. The boy was Cherry: I should have known his tousled flaxen head a mile away. The little girl I also recognised, a cripple, one of the baker's dozen of children at Brent Barn. With some difficulty I managed to pick my way through the gambolling crowd until I got my back against the wall by Cherry's side. With one arm he encircled the little bent frail body of the crippled child, while with his free hand he clung to the window-curtain for their joint security. Neither of the pair, I saw, had as yet divined my presence near them, and I waited a little before discovering myself, to listen to their talk. The child with eyes, I had already made out, was giving the child with no eyes a description of the scene

according to her lights; while Cherry's preternaturally sharp and discerning ears were contributing almost as much to the common store of information.

"Go along!" Cherry was saying with politely contemptuous incredulity.

"Yes 'tis, I tell 'ee!" screamed the little misshapen object at his side. "A gurt bladder-thing wi' three long sticks-like to it, an' fine bows o' green and blew and red ribbin atop o' them. Oh, I knows what it be! There come a ould Scotch souldier into the village wi' wan o' them, an' he blowed and squeezed the bladder under his arm, and danced around, he did, and ye never heerd sech fine music!"

"Go along!" said Cherry again, more scornfully than ever, but with very much less assurance. "Oh, do look again, Effie! Are you sure? Then I know it's for me from Uncle Malcolm! Bagpipes! Hurrah!"

The little cripple's eyes were again searching among the treasures on the Christmas-tree. Every moment she let off some delighted exclamation.

"Hundreds an' millions o' pretty things!" Her Jenny-Wren-like voice shrilled out high above the universal uproar. "Drums and trumpets and boxes o' bricks and Noah's-arks, an' I dunno what-all! And oh, what be that shiny brown square thing tied up in fine red ribbon?"

"Tell her," I whispered in Cherry's ear, "it is a workbox full of reels of coloured silks and needles and scissors and things—all for her."

"Oh, o-o-oh!"

I almost missed poor little Effie's interminably produced note of joy as she stared wide-eyed before her over Cherry's encircling arms, for at that moment Malcolm Garth came charging down the centre of the room calling out "Blind-Man's-Buff! All to play!

And a prize for every catcher and everyone caught!" Garth seized the first child that came handy for Blind Man, and soon the whole room was ringing with shouts and shrieks of laughter and a din of scurrying feet. After watching this for a while, an idea came to me.

"Cherry," said I, "here's a game at last that you can play, as well as any—wouldn't you like to try?"

I lifted him down from his perch, and had let him loose into the mêlée just too late for Linda to intercept him. She had divined, it seemed, from afar what my intention was, and had come hurrying over to our corner.

"It is too dangerous for him, Frank," she remonstrated. "He is sure to be knocked down and hurt, with all these rough boys stampeding to and fro."

"Not a bit!" said I, serenely, "Just watch him."

And Cherry soon proved that I had not miscalculated. With his two hands outstretched, he flitted hither and thither through the wildly scampering crowd, avoiding obstacles, animate or inanimate, as unerringly as a bat in the dark. Not once was he caught or even touched. Every time Blind Man made a capture, the pair were rewarded from Garth's exhaustless pouch and put aside out of the game, a new Blind Man being chosen. Thus the number of players was reduced each moment or two until at last Cherry stood alone on the whole wide floor, the centre of an astonished circle. Garth advanced towards Cherry with an eye-bandage, sadly superfluous in his case.

"When I blow the whistle, Cherry," said he, "everybody will start running across to and fro. And then you turn round three times and catch whom you may. And the one you catch wins a little packet I have in my bag."

The whistle sounded. A wild rally instantly

followed, in which all the helpers as well as the children took part. When the whistle screeched out again, Cherry and Valerie Thrapp stood in the centre of the room alone together, Valerie's black Spanish lace skirts fast gripped in the boy's two hands. Garth came forward to present the prize. Valerie took the packet and half-opened it. My eye caught a momentary glitter before she had time to thrust it into her pocket and turn away, a deep flush overspreading her face.

"Oh, Frank! Did you see?" whispered Linda excitedly at my elbow. "Did you see what it was?—a diamond ring! And she has taken it! What an extraordinary thing that Cherry should have caught her instead of one of the children."

Very extraordinary, I thought. But that was not the most extraordinary thing about the incident. And Garth careering by at that moment with a lighted taper in his hand, I caught him by the sleeve.

"I think I saw how you worked that," said I, *sotto voce*.

He laughed like a rollicking schoolboy.

"Wasn't it an inspiration?" he cried, glowing gratitude at the pair of us: most of all at Cherry now rescued from the throng and fast in Linda's embrace. Garth lowered his voice. "Mrs. Benison, I bought it the very day after you gave me that wonderful word of encouragement, and there it has been ready in my pocket all these weeks. But I was really beginning to despair of ever getting the chance to——"

He seized Cherry at that, and fairly hugged the astonished child.

"But the moment I saw who had been caught! So you detected the changing of the little packets, did you, Rector? Wasn't it cleverly done? Wouldn't I make a fine conjurer if only I had been bred to the

trade? The Christmas-tree now, for the grand finale! Cherry boy, Auntie Valerie is going to light up the tree. You will see it, plain as day."

He hurried off, and presently we descried Valerie mounted on a step-ladder which Garth was steadying below, busy lighting the innumerable little coloured candles. When the whole tree was a blaze of light from top to base, Garth disappeared amidst wild cheering from the children, Cherry shouting his hardest with the rest. The cheering was followed by a Christmas song in which the whole assembly joined. Then the cheering broke out again and went on unabated until the band somewhat incongruously struck up 'Rule, Britannia!' to the stirring strains of which the door of the ante-room was thrown open and out trotted Cherry's Shetland pony gaily caparisoned and covered with bells, drawing behind it an ornate sleigh containing Father Christmas in scarlet robe and white wig and beard. Valerie ascended the step-ladder again, and the principal event of the evening, the distribution of the presents, began.

Into the vortex of this blithesome business Linda and the rest of the helpers were immediately drawn, and I was left to look on from my solitary corner.

It lasted a solid hour, perhaps, and I was soon conscious of an ever-growing admiration for Garth's astuteness. His sun was shining, and he fell to his haymaking with a will. In the absence of Lady Admington at some important county function or other, the main direction of the affair had devolved on Valerie, and she was perforce in need of aid and counsel at every turn. Garth kept constantly by her side, and under his adroit and ready inspiration the whole thing went without a hitch to the end.

Valerie called out the names of the children from a

long list she held, and instantly Father Christmas had found the destined gift and presented it with appropriate felicitations. Throughout all he sustained a merry patter of talk, keeping the entire room in coruscations of laughter until the last present had been given. Finally he formed the whole concourse into a great ring and led the singing of Auld Lang Syne and cheers for Sir Andrew and Lady Admington and everyone else, until, at his signal, the band got on the march and, still blowing and beating, made for the open door. Behind them followed young and old in a jostling, laughing throng, and presently we stood watching the procession down the moonlit street until sight and sound of it dwindled away into the distance together.

And now the long-awaited and much-talked-of Christmas party was over indeed. But for those who had already worked so hard to make it a success there remained still much to do. The room had to be cleared and restored to its proper order, and we were soon all busily engaged at the task.

I had persuaded Linda to go home with Cherry when the other children went, and myself stayed on to lend a hand wherever it was needed. I was not so busy, however, but I managed now and then to give a glance in the direction of Garth and Valerie. Garth, now restored to his usual tweeds, contrived to keep pretty constantly in her company, and I soon saw that they were getting on amazingly well. No trace of the old chilly reserve with which I had grown used to seeing her confront him was now detectable in her mien. She seemed to have caught something of his own indomitable spirit of gaiety, and returned him rally for rally as they went about in the room together with a great basket, picking up the endless litter of discharged crackers and other odds-and-ends appertaining to the

feast. And as this busy time wore on, I could not but see a progressive deepening of intimacy between the two.

Finally, as I stood in the dim outer lobby stacking borrowed chairs for ready removal by their various owners on the morrow, Valerie came out accompanied by Garth.

She was cloaked and bonneted, and was evidently leaving for home. The two were talking earnestly together, so earnestly indeed that it was evident neither perceived my presence. For a moment or two they stood side by side on the outer step looking silently forth into the white still night. Then suddenly Valerie turned, gave her hand into Garth's for one lingering moment, and without another word sped away down the street over the scrunching snow. Garth stood gazing after her until she had turned the corner. And then he wheeled about into the flood of light from the open door, showing me such a radiant face that I was no longer in any doubt of the length to which matters between Valerie and himself had gone.

I gave him a few moments' start of me, then followed him back into the building. I found him alone in the little ante-room packing up his Father Christmas gear. At once on sight of me he had both my hands in such a grip as made me wince.

"Are you going back—straight back—to the house, Rector?" he cried, his eyes fairly flashing triumphant joy. "Take a message from me to Mrs. Benison, will you? The most glorious news! Tell her—tell her—— Heavens and earth! Rector! my head is spinning like Cherry's top to-night, and I hardly know how to—to——"

"I think I can guess," said I, helping him out. "It is Diana now who is going to have her nose put out of joint."

He laughed uproariously, not indeed at the feeble pleasantry but because his state was perilously in need of some such explosive outlet. And in the midst of the laugh, he became suddenly tender and grave.

"No. I don't deserve it! that's the honest truth," he said. "But there it is, Rector dear, and I must try to live up to the thing. And it is all Mrs. Benison's doing, bless her! If I were only a better man! If only my life had not been so brutally self-centred and absorbed! If only—— Rector, did you ever hear of a man converted through joy?—filled in a moment with a vision of his past beastliness, and a great resolve that his life shall henceforth become as good and clean as prayer and a Saviour can make it, all because—yes! because the one woman in the world for him has promised to join her life to his life? Oh, you think I am raving nonsense! Well: you shall see. This has changed me, I tell you, to the very core—all done in a single moment by a single word! God send I may really become what now I truly desire."

The last was said in so hushed, so humble a tone that I only just caught the drift of it.

"Yes," I answered him, "I can well believe all you say, and—and I rejoice at it, and wish you joy in the new life coming to you. When—when do you think of marrying? My wife will ask that question of me first of all."

"When? Why not at once? Why should we wait?" Garth returned, sitting down on the box he had been cording, and feeling in his pocket for his pipe, strangely at the same moment as I felt for mine. We filled together. "Valerie—she is alone in the world, and so am I. And so is Cherry. Ah, what an extraordinarily kind act that is of yours and your wife's! To give him up to us!—I only learnt of it from Valerie

this evening. She made taking him to live with us a sort of condition, but of course there is nothing better I could wish. So that was easily settled between us. When are we going to marry, Rector? Why, as soon as I can get Blue-Bottles in fit trim for her, and as soon as the Manor folk will let her go, and as soon as Valerie can get her bride's kit together, and as soon as—— But of course you will not be a difficulty, Rector dear. I know you will be willing enough to tie the knot. Shall we say in a month's time?"

We puffed at our pipes together in silence for a moment. Then I took the hand held out to me, and returned its friendly grasp. "I shall be ready," said I, "whenever you are ready. But you will have plenty to do in the interval—a month soon flies by. At any rate you will not have much time to give to amateur detective work between now and then."

He laughed.

"No, indeed!" said he. "Poor old Ferriday! He won't find me so ready for those long confabulations in his cosy study as I have been of late. And it will be worse still by and by, when Blue-Bottles has something very much better to offer to keep me home of nights."

He broke off then with an exclamation, to feel hurriedly in his pockets.

"And that reminds me! There came a note from Ferriday just as I was leaving the house. No time to open it before. Let us see what it is about."

He opened the letter, and hurriedly scanned its contents. An amused ejaculation escaped him.

"I was thinking," said he, "I had had about enough of this lawyer-man's incessant chopping and changing. But here is another of the old kind. Just listen to this: 'Dear Garth: *re* the *Liscord death-mystery*. I

have what I think will be a surprising piece of news for you. Your parson's lady was entirely wrong about the affair, as women who meddle in serious matters always are. Still, as you wished it, I did my best to follow up her precious beer-house theory. But there was nothing in it, as I have believed all along, and as I hope soon to be able to prove. I have now lit upon a brand-new trail, and the scent is already growing hot. Come and see me, and I will explain—can't put details in a letter. But if what I suspect turns out true, I think I can promise that certain fine folk whom we both know will be fairly staggered. No time for more now except this one last word—Poor Liscord never died of heart-failure. The thing was nothing else but foul cold-blooded murder, and I am going to bring the criminal to book. Yours sincerely, John Ferriday.'"

"You will go and see him, of course?" said I, as Garth finished reading the letter. He smiled derisively. He screwed up the sheet and carelessly cast it into the fire before him.

"Not I!" he returned. "Why should I? I am heartily sick of the whole business. Besides, I am on a new trail of my own, of a vastly more pleasant character; and that, as you say, will take me all my time."

CHAPTER XXI

"A BOTTLE IN THE SMOKE"

I PASS over the events of the four weeks that followed, and come to a day towards the beginning of February, almost on the brink of the appointed date for the marriage of Valerie Thrapp and Malcolm Garth.

It was a date fateful to us all, as was soon to be proved. Yet never did a day dawn so full of bright portents. December with its snows had been followed by a January of pitiless icy blasts. But now in a single night winter had vanished. With the first level golden ray of morning, Linda and I had been roused by an unwonted jubilee of bird-song in the garden below. Throwing the casements back, I put head and shoulders out into an air that was pure balm of Gilead—warm, it seemed, as summer. I called to her the good news. She was by my side in a moment, and together we stood, watching the new-born sun lift over the distant woodlands out of a misty bed of silver and amber and rose.

In an hour or two the last gauzy wisp of vapour had disappeared from the sky. The sun poured hot from a heaven of unsullied blue. After breakfast, I tried to get down to my books, and Linda to her household duties. But the rejoicing world outside was too much for us. Towards noon I could stand it no more. I would go and look at the bees, just for a minute or

two, I said to myself—their joyful humming had been stealing up to me through the open window of my little crow's-nest of a study all the morning long.

I strolled down the garden towards the hidden spot where the hives were congregated, noting sheaves of white snowdrops and tongues of yellow crocus bristling up on every side into the serene sunny air. And, turning the corner of the box-hedge, I came suddenly upon this welcome but unawaited spectacle—Linda kneeling down by one of the busiest hives in the midst of a cloud of darting, scintillating crystal wings.

"Oh, Frank, they are so glad to get out again after the long winter!" she cried to me the moment I came into view. "Look how they are pouring out of the hives, tumbling over one another to get the first breath of spring air and beam of sunshine! Oh, how I would like to be a honey-bee these times!"

"A hard life," said I, kneeling down by her side to look on at the busy scene. "Lying up in a dark hole all the winter, and then nothing but toil all day from morning to night until you died from overwork and were thrown out of the hive to make room for another bee just like you. Still, there are a good many human honey-bees in the world, for all that."

She was silent a while.

"Did you hear the cavalcade arrive?" she asked presently, turning me a glowing face.

"The cavalcade? I thought I heard something. What was it all about?"

"Malcolm Garth," she returned. "On his way to Marshminster astride of Hieland Laddie. But he had brought two other horses with him, a beautiful dark mare the very own sister to Laddie, and a little Shetland just like the Manor pony—presents for Valerie and Cherry: they are in the stable now, where Valerie and

the boy are still gloating over them in their fine brand-new saddles and bridles. Malcolm will be back in the afternoon, and then the three are going for a ride together."

"Was Valerie here when Garth arrived?" I asked.

"She came in just as he was leaving. I never saw anyone so pleasantly taken aback in my life. And what do you think she did?"

"Just said 'Thank you,' I suppose," said I, "and then calmly went off with Cherry out of sight."

"You are wrong," returned Linda. "She never said a single word. She stood a moment stroking her new horse and looking down on the ground. Then she turned to Malcolm, put a hand on each of his shoulders, and kissed him right on the lips."

"For the first time in their lives!"

"Perhaps. But there must always be a beginning to everything. And these two have made a real beginning together now, Frank, I truly believe. It is all coming right! You will see!"

The bees were becoming very attentive to us both: not in any wise vindictively, but because, especially at this early time of year, bees love to settle on a warm human skin. Several were basking on my own face at the moment, and Linda was peppered all over with them. I gave her a hand and together we rose and strolled away through the garden. We came to rest at last once more in the little jasmine-smothered arbour that overlooked the lawn—a perfect trap for the sunbeams. There we sat awhile listening to the thrushes singing all about us, and the larks carolling far and near in the tender blue overhead.

"I have not told him yet, Frank," said Linda, her thoughts running on Cherry then as always. "And now I have made up my mind not to tell him at all.

It will only mean a lot of useless and painful explanations. When they come back after the honeymoon, he and I are to be waiting at Blue-Bottles to receive them. And then I am going to fade away on some pretext or other. All the things in his room down to the linnet and dormice are to be carried down beforehand, and his new room at Blue-Bottles will be ready for him just like the old. He will soon get used to the change. Don't you see this is much the wiser plan?" And while I was hesitating what to say, she added quickly—"I am determined to be done with selfish sorrowing, dear. He has come into my life, and now he is going out of it. He brought joy, and he takes joy with him, and he leaves joy that might never have been if he had not come. What could I wish for better, either for him, or them, or me?"

I looked round at her wonderingly, reverently. I kissed her then just as Valerie had kissed Malcolm Garth. Valerie had got one of the dreams of her life, no doubt, in that huge, high-stepping bloodmare. But I had got all the king's horses and all the king's men.

And in that very moment all unknowingly, she pierced me to the quick. Suddenly her old bright laugh rang out.

"What are you laughing at?" said I, completely at a loss.

"Oh, Frank, I had forgotten! I must tell you! The funniest thing! I was at the Marks' to tea yesterday, and of course the talk was all about the coming wedding. And Mrs. Marks—— Now don't be annoyed, Frank: the dear simple old lady meant not the slightest harm: I really and truly believe she intended it only as a sort of compliment to me. She looked round her table and said 'I am sure we are all very glad Miss Thrapp has found a mate, if only for

Mrs. Benison's sake!' And when I asked her, why for my sake? she just smiled roguishly and said 'Oh, you must be pleased, Mrs. Benison, after cutting her out as you did, you know.' And when I said I didn't know, and everyone in the room had left off talking to listen to us, Mrs. Marks got into her sweetest, most affectionate, vein. Of course I knew, she insisted, archly, I must be only making fun of her. 'Didn't everyone know that the Rector and Miss Thrapp had been secretly in love with each other for a very long time? And just as we were all expecting to hear that—— Oh, Mrs. Benison, it was a regular triumph for you! But poor Valerie!—just to be thrown aside in a moment like that! Still, all's well that ends well. And 'tis true she has got a much younger and richer gentleman for a husband. So you must be real glad, Mrs. Benison, just as we all are, as things have turned out——' and a lot more like that, Frank. But I haven't really made you angry, dear, have I? I thought you would only laugh as I did. Of course I didn't believe a single word."

Across the lawn at that moment, holding up her skirts out of the dew, came Mrs. Odling, making straight for our sunny shelter. She was evidently in a fume about something.

"'Tis Sir Andrew Admington, and summun along wi' him," she said irately—morning callers always strangely upset Mrs. Odling. "In the drawing-room they be, and Sir Andrew warnts to see the Rector very particular. I tould 'em as you was not i' the house, which was trew enough. But 'twarnt no good. I must go and find the Rector, dreckly-minute, sez he, fearful solemn-like. ''Tis very important,' he sez, 'so be quick about it, an' doant waste no time,' he sez. Come along, Rector—there be no help for 't."

On opening the drawing-room door, I beheld first Sir Andrew Admington astride of the hearthrug, his hands thrust deep in his breeches-pockets, eyes downcast, face very grave and set. In the window with his back to me, darkly silhouetted against the green and gold of the morning, stood another man whom I did not immediately recognise. But he turned slowly at sound of my entry, and disclosed the face of Ferriday, the Stavisham lawyer. Something told me at once that these two were here on no ordinary business, and the suspicion was confirmed by Sir Andrew's first words. Neither of the pair offered me any greeting: it seemed to be agreed between them that it was a time when formalities were out of place.

"Benison," said Sir Andrew, "I am in great trouble—deeper trouble than ever before in my life, as you will believe when you come to hear. Mr. Ferriday has, this morning, laid before me, as chairman of the bench of magistrates, some information of the gravest character; and I have come, we have both come, to ask your advice——"

"No, no, sir! Not exactly that, I think."

Ferriday had sharply interposed. I looked at him. There was a curious cast upon his sallow puffy face, and a crafty, exultant glint in his pale slits of eyes that struck me very unfavourably. The fat heavily-ringed hand, which held to his side a bundle of documents tied up in red tape, incessantly clutched and relaxed as though it encircled a human throat rather than mere paper. The man was evidently in a state of excitement which he was attempting, though not wholly successfully, to conceal.

"You must not put it quite like that, Sir Andrew. You will remember I had nothing whatever to do with the suggestion that Mr. Benison should be consulted.

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He seemed unable to go on for the mo
threw up his hands with a sort of despairing gesture and then brought them slowly down at full stretch until they rested palms uppermost on the table before him. He bowed his head.

"Benison," he said huskily, "I have pledged my honour on your keeping secret what I am going to tell

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motive was in the thing he was now doing;
and it had come over me that I might hold Valerie's whole safety and well-being, even perhaps her very life itself, in my keeping. I met Ferriday's look as though I were staring at a wall of stone.

"Absolutely preposterous!" I said. "I would as soon suspect my own wife. What possible grounds

can Mr. Ferriday advance for such an absurdity?"

"Mr. Ferriday," returned the lawyer, with heavy sarcasm, "is not fool enough, he thanks you, to advance more grounds at present than will serve to make out a *prima-facie* case for the issue of the warrant on suspicion which he has asked for. So much he has already done, as Sir Andrew admits. Now you yourself shall hear what those grounds are, Rector, seeing that Sir Andrew Admington desires it: though I must point out that his request is wholly against all regular procedure in law. But let that pass—it is his responsibility as chairman of the bench: not mine, as mere clerk. My grounds are these, and they are more than enough for my purpose."

He glanced at his papers a moment, then went on.

"The man Henry Liscord met his death on the evening of September 26th last, which we all know was the date of Stavisham Horse Fair. Liscord was last seen alive at about six o'clock, just after sunset, when he left the town taking the downland path leading to this village of Fairthorne. He was found dead—foully murdered, as I affirm—at a spot about two miles on his way. The base of his skull had been fractured by a heavy blow from behind, and the doctor's evidence goes to prove that his death, whatever its cause, must have occurred within an hour or so of the time he was last seen alive."

He looked up at me evidently to note what effect his words had produced. He went on again impressively.

"Very well. Now we come to Miss Valerie Thrapp and her movements on the same day. She goes to the Fair on horseback in the morning, riding in company with Sir Andrew Admington. The two are pretty constantly together on and off all through the day until

early evening, when Miss Thrapp excuses herself from remaining longer on account of a headache, and elects to ride home alone. She goes to the inn where her horse had been stabled, mounts and rides off. I can fix the time almost exactly—it must have been within half-an-hour of the dead man's leaving the town after having enquired the nearest way to Fairthorne. From that time until Miss Thrapp is seen leading her horse into the stable-yard of Fairthorne Manor past eight o'clock at night and going up secretly to her room by the back-stairs, we can find out nothing of her movements."

Ferriday stopped. He emphasised what he now went on to say with slow, emphatic beats of his papers on the palm of his hand.

"Where was she?—what was she doing?—during those two long hours? Lady Admington had given orders that she was to be informed directly the missing Miss Thrapp turned up at the Manor. Lady Admington went to Miss Thrapp's room immediately her arrival was reported to her. She found her in a strangely overwrought and distressed state. Lady Admington interrogated her. But not one word in explanation of her long absence would Miss Thrapp give at that time, and she has steadily refused to answer any questions on the matter ever since. Now, Rector, why should she refuse? Tell me that, if you can! Is not the inference obvious? At some time during those two hours, Henry Liscord was cruelly done to death. Who killed him, unless——"

"Oh, you bloody villain!"

I suppose the words, wrung from me in the utter anguish and horror of that moment as I realised all that was gathering about Valerie and about myself, must have been accompanied by some involuntary

gesture, for the man started back, throwing up his hand. But the cruel, insolent sneer of triumph never left his face. He opened his bundle of papers.

"Ah, Rector, it isn't the first time, by all accounts, you have found occasion to vilify me—sometimes even to my employer, as I happen to know. But abuse will not do away with cold hard facts." He held out an envelope. "Look at that! It contained a five-pound note: nothing else. Not a scrap of writing. It was posted in Stavisham on the afternoon of the Horse Fair day, as the post-mark proves. It is addressed, as you see, to Mr. H. Liscord, c/o of Mrs. Clark, 6, Lime Alley, Marshminster—the common lodging-house where the man had put up with his blind little son. He never received the letter. For it reached its destination only the following morning when he was lying cold and dead out on the lonely Down. But look at the writing on the envelope, Rector. You ought to know it well enough, if all stories are true. You see it is the writing of Miss Valerie Thrapp."

There fell about me then a dreadful kind of silence and blindness. All the world of sound and vision seemed to leave me, and I could hear nothing but Ferriday's dry, grating voice, see nothing but his exulting vengeful face. I did not know that Sir Andrew had risen until I felt his arm linked gently but firmly through mine. He led me to a chair. The silence and blindness slowly cleared away.

"Benison," said Sir Andrew, "I can well believe this has been a tremendous shock to you, as it has been to me. But there it is, and it must be faced. Here is this fact, startlingly new to us both, that Valerie must have been acquainted with the dead man, for she was sending him money secretly; and it is enough to justify the warrant, taken into account with the other

circumstances. We must be all agreed upon that, and you must wonder, as Mr. Ferriday did, why I wanted to bring you into this at all. For what could you possibly do or say to alter the facts?"

He was speaking to me, indeed, but he was looking steadily at the lawyer all the time. And now his voice and whole manner underwent a change. He pulled himself up erect. His voice took on a firmer ring.

"Ferriday, I am going to make an appeal to you. It is true I brought you down to this house because the Rector is my life-long friend, and I felt I needed a friend at such a crisis. But now I must tell you I had another reason for asking you to come here. Another reason, Ferriday: do you hear?"

The lawyer looked up sharply.

"Well, sir?" he queried, after a moment's intensive study of Sir Andrew's face.

"Yes: another reason. Now listen to me. I think you make too much of Miss Thrapp's refusal to discuss her doings and whereabouts during those two hours you speak of. Mere pique may have prompted her in the refusal in the first place, and pride, resentment, in maintaining it afterwards. My wife admits she went to her in a passion, and Miss Thrapp may have considered herself insulted, possibly with some cause. But now that she can be brought to realise, by this charge looming over her, that her very life may depend on her speaking, we can have no doubt that speak she will. I believe, and Mr. Benison here believes, as I can see, that she can account for her time on that night, and so honourably clear herself. Let us give her the chance, Ferriday. She is in this house at the present moment, I know. I appeal to you to agree to her being called in, duly warned, and then questioned in the strictest way."

I would not have believed Ferriday's tallowy face could colour under any circumstances. But at this it purpled to the eyebrows with angry astonishment.

"Good heavens, Sir Andrew!" he rasped out, "what can you be thinking of? To give a suspected person warning like this that the law is on their track! Why the next thing might be that she would be off to the ends of the earth, or might commit suicide—it has happened so more than once in my experience, and in yours too. No, no, Sir Andrew! Your word is passed, remember. Not one single syllable of this to anyone but Mr. Benison. And now you have had your consultation with him, and little good it has done as far as I can see, the only thing for us to do is to——"

"Stop, my friend!"

Sir Andrew crossed the room and stood looking the lawyer closely, searchingly, in the face.

"You have no private animosity in this? Your only motive is to see a crime meet with its due punishment?"

"Certainly, sir. How can you doubt it?" Ferriday's injured air was a study. "But I cannot consent to what you ask. It is wholly against all law, and all prudence. What would be said of me in court, sir?—think of that! Ah! and what would be said of you? For your own sake, Sir Andrew, as well as mine, I cannot think of it. Let us be going."

Sir Andrew got a little closer to him still.

"Very well, then. Now listen to what I have further to say. I believe—Mr. Benison believes—in this girl's entire innocence. And because I believe this, I am ready to do anything, take any risk, to save her the disgrace and exposure of a public trial. Now, Ferriday, I make one more last appeal to you—not as a magistrate, God knows, but as a man. If this woman

is guilty, she shall be brought to justice—on that I give you my word. Hear her now; and then, if you still think there is a case against her, I undertake that she shall stand her trial. But refuse me what I ask—force her to the pain and ignominy of having publicly to refute the charge, then I tell you that you will be doing an abominable thing, and I swear to you I will spend my last ounce of strength and last penny in the world in punishing you for such wickedness. Do you understand? I will break you, Ferriday. On the day this woman is acquitted of this infamous charge—and she will be acquitted: take my word for it—you shall be hounded out of this country-side, a ruined man. Now choose!"

John Ferriday's mouth had gradually opened as this harangue proceeded, and now he stood with it at full stretch, and both eyes as well. Which would he choose?—I kept asking myself in a fever of distress and apprehension as I watched the two men silently facing each other for what seemed an interminable time. And then Ferriday made his master a little obsequious bow of submission. He sat himself down at the table with a resigned air, and fell to arranging his papers before him.

"But it must come from you, Sir Andrew," he protested; "it must be your act, and on your sole responsibility. I am a poor man, and need to guard my reputation. Very well. Let her be brought in."

Sir Andrew turned from him with undisguised contumely.

"Will you ring, Benison?" he quietly said.

CHAPTER XXII

THE DARKEST HOUR BEFORE—

In those direful minutes that followed, as we three waited for Valerie's coming, I think I lived through the wretchedest, most ignoble fragment of all my life.

Not a word did any of us utter. Ferriday sat at the table busily conning over his papers and note-book. Sir Andrew Admington stood with his back to the fire as intently studying his boots. For myself, I measured out slow, uneasy paces from one spray of forlorn faded green fern in the carpet to another, stopping at every turn privily to take stock of the seated man.

Every time I glanced in Ferriday's direction, the less did I like the look of him. Gradually he had thrown off his baffled, crestfallen air, and his face was beginning to show a stealthy jubilation. As he turned over the leaves of his note-book, he heavily underscored certain entries therein, and each time he did so his sinister look of satisfaction seemed to increase. Finally he threw his pencil down, leant back in his chair with a thumb in each of his armpits, directed an impatient glance towards the door.

"This young woman," said he, his professional air now full upon him, "seems to be difficult to find. Your messenger, Rector, has been gone a good ten minutes. Strange—don't you think?"

"Shall I go and look for her?" I asked, forgetting for the moment the sort of man I had to deal with.

His only answer was a cunning shake of the head and a low ironical snigger that infuriated me, though I was still more angry at my own incaution than at his insolence. But at that moment footsteps and low voices reached our ears. The door opened. Valerie Thrapp came in, followed, to my inexpressible concern, consternation indeed, by my wife. Before I could speak, something in my look drew Linda quickly to my side.

"I must stand by her," she whispered hurriedly. "I don't know what it can possibly be about. But that man!—I had to come with her, Frank—she needs me, I know."

No time for farther remonstrance was left to me, for Sir Andrew was already speaking.

"Valerie, my dear,"—I think I never heard a truer ring of fatherly kindness in any man's tone—"Valerie, you will wonder why I have sent for you. The truth is the Rector and Mr. Ferriday here and myself have a very grave matter under consideration, and we have now arrived at a point where we can go no farther without your help. There are some questions that must be put to you——"

"Put to me! Why?"

The girl had spoken very quietly, collectedly: but there was no doubt of her exceeding wonder at Sir Andrew's words. She was in the riding-habit which she wore so constantly and by which she was as well known on all that country-side, as by the heavy huntsman's crop that now depended from her hand. I noted that she had turned one swift glance at Ferriday on her entry, but gave him no other sign of recognition. For his part the lawyer had so far forgotten his manners

on entry of the ladies, as neither to rise nor even look at them, but sat quite still affecting to be busy with the papers before him. She repeated her interrogation, as Sir Andrew hesitated.

"Why must I be questioned? If it is about the incident I am thinking of, surely that is too trivial, Sir Andrew, to trouble you with. And I can only wonder that Mr. Ferriday——"

It was Ferriday who stopped her then, with a hastily uplifted hand.

"One moment, Miss Thrapp!"

He beckoned to Sir Andrew. Whispered words passed between the two. Then Sir Andrew nodded and fell back. Ferriday stood up. He looked at Valerie straightly enough now.

"Yes! there are questions to be put, Miss Thrapp—and to you," said he, paying the words out clearly like a soundsman telling the fathoms of his line. "And why to you?—because they concern you very stringently. In fact, on the answers you give to them may depend not only your good name but your freedom, even perhaps your life."

I felt Linda start at this, and heard her low exclamation. She clutched at my arm, but immediately broke away from me and crept to Valerie's side. But Valerie herself gave no sign. She merely said "Go on," as Ferriday paused. He threw up his fat chin.

"Go on—yes!" said he, "I can go on, as you will soon find. But first I have a duty to fulfil. I have to warn you, Miss Thrapp, that anything you say now may be used against you later, perhaps in a criminal court. Do you understand that quite clearly?"

"Go on, I tell you!"

Still very quietly the words were spoken. But there was a fire coming in the dark eyes now, oddly

mingling, like sunset glow and moonlight, with the look cold scorn that had held them hitherto. Ferriday's face was also changing. Rage and hate filled the man, body and soul, I well knew. But outwardly his demeanour had grown as frigid as hers. More deliberately than ever, every word poised in mid-air, as it were, before he let it fall, he went on:

"Good! Now here is my first question. Answer it or not, just as you please. Last autumn, as you are aware, a man, a stranger, was found dead and mutilated on the Downs not far from this village. Murder was suspected, but nothing proved. You knew that man, did you not?"

Ferriday's mouth closed like a trap on the last word. He bent forward for her answer. None came. The fat chin went up again, as he looked round for a moment meaningly at Sir Andrew.

"But there is no doubt of it, Miss Thrapp. For you have been sending money to him abroad from time to time over several years, as I can prove. And you did so after he and his little son had returned to England and were in a lodging at Marshminster. Here is an envelope addressed to him in your own hand-writing, and posted on the very day he met his death. So you see there is no use denying——"

"I do not deny it. Go on."

Valerie had moved not a muscle from the moment she had entered the room and taken her stand before her interlocutor. Even now she stood proudly erect and motionless as ever: only the hand which hung by her side secretly met Linda's hand and retained it in a close clasp. Strangely rich and clear her voice sounded, breaking in upon Ferriday's dry legal tones. The lawyer went on—still with a sidelong glance upon Sir Andrew.

"Thank you. That clears the air somewhat. We shall get on better now, I see. Now listen while I sketch in for you a little family history, and stop me if I say anything contrary to the facts. Four years ago, under Lady Admington's instructions, I caused an advertisement to appear in the London *Times* asking for a private secretary. You answered that advertisement, and eventually obtained the post. You represented yourself as a single young lady in search of employment. That was technically true, but it was not the whole truth. I will not ask you, because the reason is obvious, why you suppressed the fact that you had been married, but that your husband had obtained a divorce against you for misconduct, he being given custody of your child. But I will ask you this. Was not his name Henry Liscord ?—the same name as the man so cruelly done to death last autumn on the Downs, and with whom you admit you were acquainted ?"

Ferriday paused, still furtively watching Sir Andrew Admington. Valerie turned until she met and held Sir Andrew's troubled, puzzled eyes.

"Judge me!" she said slowly, under her breath. "It is all true. And here is the rest of the story. A girl of eighteen, unhappy in her home, a raw sentimentalist, falls in love with a beautiful voice. Behind the voice not a man as she thought, but a mere shell of vanities and artificialities and—yes!—vices. But the girl only finds all that out after her run-away marriage. What was she to do then ? Make the best of it, she resolved, for her own pride's sake, for the sake of the child that was coming. But it could not be. It was all too cruel, too impossible. Drink against her, gambling against her, incessant violence of words and even blows. The child comes. Carried in such days

of wretched disillusionment, how could he prosper? He is born with a terrible affliction. His father goes from bad to worse. At last his tortured mother makes a mad bid for freedom, and as madly carries it through. What Mr. Ferriday has told you, came to pass. The freedom is gained, but in gaining it she loses all. She did not care at the time—she was mad, I tell you. The father goes to the Colonies on a professional tour, taking the child with him—while the beautiful voice lasted there was always plenty of money—and the mother sets to work to obliterate the past. She resolves to create a totally new life and new chance for herself far away from London among strangers. Why should she not? She was only just of age, all her life still before her. She saw Lady Admington's advertisement. The rest you know."

At that Valerie swept round again towards Ferriday. "Go on," she said to him in the same frigid, disdainful tone as before.

"Be sure I will," returned the lawyer. "Now listen to a little more personal history, Miss Thrapp. Something happened—did it not?—about a year after your coming to Fairthorne Manor, by which time you had become Sir Andrew's bailiff and his confidant in the affairs of his estate. Did you not get into some trouble over your accounts and——"

"Ferriday, Ferriday!—is this necessary?" The Squire had started forward, his face hotly aflush.

"I am afraid it is, Sir Andrew. It is a surprise to you, I can well believe, to see that I have knowledge of the matter, as it was so carefully hushed up at the time. But it is a lawyer's business to know everything. Some money received on your behalf never reached your bankers. You forgave the defaulter. But you never knew what became of that money. Well I

can tell you—or rather I will ask Miss Thrapp to tell you. It went to Australia, did it not, Miss Thrapp?—to this very man."

Again Valerie turned to Sir Andrew. For the first time her voice wavered.

"He—they were in great trouble, and in want. His way of life had broken him down utterly at last. His health had gone, and with it his voice. He had saved nothing, of course. They were in destitution—he wrote and told *me* that—me of all people! He knew how I had loved the child. He wrote that the boy was in danger of starvation. Oh, what else could I do? I telegraphed the money. And then—then——"

"Valerie, it does not matter now. Do not think of it for a single moment. I had forgotten all about it. Never think of it again, my dear!"

In his distress at her distress, Sir Andrew had drawn to her side. He laid a hand tenderly upon her heaving shoulder. "Can we not leave this alone, Ferriday?" he asked sharply, sternly. The lawyer shook his head. As though the sudden menace in Sir Andrew's tone was upon her and not on himself, he turned to Valerie, raising his own voice to the same sharp minatory pitch.

"Miss Thrapp," he cried, "I must and will have it out of you. This man was putting such pressure on you three years ago that you risked robbing your employer rather than deny him. He has been dunning you for money off and on ever since—I have proof that you have sent considerable sums to him repeatedly. Finally he returns to England, and at once comes down to this neighbourhood to seek you out. What was his purpose? He could have no other object than to extort more money from you. Extort—yes! No doubt he knew that you had feathered a fine nest

for yourself at the Manor here, and his design was to threaten to expose your past to your employer, and so ruin all your plans. Blackmail—that was what it was. And good reason you had to fear him:—a divorced, guilty woman! You were in a desperate fix, and no mistake! So what was the wicked thing that now came into your heart to do? What was it? Well, here is my last question to you; answer it how you can, but answer it you must, here and now. Henry Liscord met his end by a foul blow dealt from behind on a lonely spot on the Down some time after half-past six o'clock on the evening of September the twenty-sixth last—the day of the annual Horse Fair at Stavisham. Where were you?—what were you doing?—about that time."

The cruellest look I ever beheld on human face was on Ferriday's then, as he bent forward over the table towards the now shrinking, trembling woman, throwing the words at her as though they were vitriol. Her fortitude had given way at last. She would have fallen, I believe, had not Linda upheld her. For a moment she swayed giddily. And then, as by an effort superhuman, I saw her battle with it and beat it all down. The blood rose crimsoning to her lips again. She turned to Ferriday once more with a wonderful resumption of her former cold disdain.

"I understand," she said. "But why should I answer you? I know well why you are doing this. It is not out of any zeal for justice. You are only trying to revenge yourself against me for a slight I once put upon you, as more people than one in this room know. I have done wrong in my life: many times perhaps. But at least my hands are innocent of blood. Your suggestion is infamous. I treat it and you only with the contempt you deserve."

Ferriday bent forward still more now, with a great show of earnest impressiveness.

"Am I to understand then," he cried, "that after all I have said, after all your own damaging admissions, and after being forced, as Sir Andrew Admington here must see, to realise what deep suspicion now rests upon you, you yet persist in refusing to say where you were between the hours of half-past six and a little after eight o'clock on the evening of Stavisham Horse Fair Day?—the very time when this man must have met his death!"

For an infinitesimal fraction of time, Valerie's eyes sought mine. Only the merest, minutest lightning flash of meaning she gave me. But it was enough to convey an inkling of what she intended to do. And before I could think, before I could get again the breath which shame and terror between them seemed to have driven out of me for ever, she had turned to the lawyer once more. In a passion of indignation now the words broke from her.

"You are to understand, Mr. Ferriday," she cried, "that I take your suggestion as simply monstrous—too horrifying to think of. I can, if I choose, account for every moment of my time on that evening. But never at the bidding of a man like you. Man?—no one but a mongrel-cur would speak to a woman as you have spoken to me!"

And then Ferriday, stung out of his habitual caution by this, brought into action a hitherto masked battery, but his deadliest of all. He pointed to the huntsman's whip in Valerie's hand.

"Why do you carry a thing like that?" he demanded.

"Why should I not?" she replied. "You must know what it is for. I am whipper-in to our pack."

"Ah yes! To be sure. Will you permit me to look at it a moment?"

Valerie hesitated, wondering at the strange request. She ended by quietly laying the whip upon the table. Ferriday took it, weighing it in his hand.

"But why," he asked, speaking to Valerie, but looking round with crafty significance at his chief—"why is the handle so stout and so heavily loaded? But of course everyone knows—it is for striking the latches off field-gates that may be padlocked and inconveniently in the way of the Hunt." He affected to ponder, then laid the whip down upon the table again. "Hah! What a very handy implement that would be," he said, "if the whipper-in wanted to—kill a man!"

At the word, a silence of stupefaction fell upon the whole room. Ferriday stood stock-still, mutely, sternly pointing at the thing on the table before him. When he had sufficiently enjoyed the general consternation, he turned to Sir Andrew.

"That is all I have to say, sir," he said. "What you required of me has been done, and done impartially, I hope. It has failed, as I knew it would. What will you do now?"

"Do, Ferriday?"

The sharpness of Sir Andrew's retort rang like beaten brass in the dreadful stillness that engulfed us all.

"What will I do? It is, what will Miss Thrapp do! And there can be no doubt of that now. She will tell you all you want. Valerie, my dear, this false pride has been carried far enough. Away with it! Speak and clear yourself, as we know you can."

"I will not."

Scarce above her breath, yet uttered with such vehemence of decision, Valerie's answer made Sir Andrew

start. He flung round at her in sudden anger born of real alarm.

"Valerie, what folly is this? You cannot mean it? Speak out, child! Do you not see how black things are against you?"

"I see only too well, Sir Andrew. But I cannot do as you wish. Oh, do not be hard on me! I know how I must be grieving you. But—but I cannot, I cannot!"

In his exceeding distress, the poor Squire seized her roughly by the wrist.

"Valerie! Are you mad? Don't you understand that after hearing what I have just heard, there remains nothing for me but to sign an order for your detention, and that you will be taken to prison straight from this very room, and will be put on trial for your life perhaps? Then you will be compelled to speak. But it will be too late to save you, and those who love you, from the hideous disgrace of it all."

Valerie's breath was coming hard and quick now. Her lip trembled. But she still looked the lawyer steadily in the face.

"Yes: I understand all that. I have foreseen it from the beginning. But I cannot help it. I absolutely refuse to say one word more. Oh, do not press me, Sir Andrew! There is a—a reason——"

"Reason!"

Fairly beside himself now, Sir Andrew cast away her hand as wrathfully as he had first gripped it.

"Reason, do you call it? You are nothing but a mad fool, Valerie! And now your blood be upon your own head!"

Despairfully he turned from her. "Ferriday," he said brokenly, "go and do what is necessary. Don't

delay. I will stay here with Miss Thrapp until you return."

At that the old dumb stupefaction fell again upon the room. But in a moment it was broken by Linda's voice. In an anguish of grief and horror, she wound her arms about the silently weeping woman at her side.

"Oh, Valerie, you must speak now!" she cried. "We all know you are innocent of this. We know you can clear yourself at a word. Speak now, dear! Tell Sir Andrew where you were on that night. Tell him in private, if you will not say it before this—this wicked man who hates you and wants to work you all the harm he can. Even if you were doing some real wrong——"

Valerie had stopped her with a very storm of loving embraces and kisses upon her cheek, her brows, her wealth of silvered brown hair.

"Wrong or right, it makes no difference, dear. I cannot, and I will not. There is a reason. There are others who—who would be cruelly injured if—if I——"

"But think of your own child, Valerie! The child you thought you had lost for ever, but have now found again so wonderfully! You must speak for his sake. Who could be more cruelly injured than he, if you are put on public trial and lose your freedom for life, or even lose your life itself? Is he not afflicted enough already? Oh, Valerie! you cannot really love him if you allow this dreadful thing to come to pass."

There came then again that flashing look out of Valerie's great dark eyes, tear-flooded now, straight across the room into mine. No weakening of her determination did I read in it. But under the torture of Linda's appeal I could see that something within her was breaking, and I knew well what. Yet I could

neither move nor utter word, and the look was gone in a moment. Slowly, but putting forth all her strength, I could see, Valerie unwound the arms about her. She broke away from Linda's side.

"Mr. Ferriday!"

The lawyer had gathered up his papers and was moving to the door.

"I will go with you. That will be the simplest plan. My cloak is in the hall, and——"

But Linda had followed her, never ceasing her supplication. Now, as Valerie again repelled her, keeping her at arm's stretch as she herself strove to reach the door, Linda, in her utter distress and horror, cried my name.

"Frank! Frank! Help me! We must not let her go. You are her friend. You are her priest. You have power over her—she will listen to you. Oh, Frank! help me to save her, and save Cherry from this!"

John Ferriday had reached the door, and there he stood, his fingers clutching and relaxing upon his bundle of papers just as I had first seen him that morning. He had embrued his hands in wickedness pretty deeply that day. But I myself had come then within a hair's breadth of a greater villainy than all. Yet not wholly and irrevocably, God be thanked! Over and over again in my past life, cowardice had driven me to the very brink of wrong; but never, praise be to God, right over into the abyss. And now, as of old, the Everlasting Arms restrained me. I answered Linda's call as fervently as it had been uttered.

"Linda! I can, and will!"

A swift stride took me to the door. In a moment it was closed and my back against it. A scowl darkened the lawyer's face.

"I am going out, can't you see?" he muttered fiercely. "What are you doing this for? Stand aside, please, and let me pass!"

"You are going out," said I, "sure enough. But first you are going to hear what I am about to say."

He made as though he would thrust me aside. But I was a bigger man than he. Instead of forcing a passage, he was sent spinning into the middle of the room. From my pocket I drew out the little old Bible I always carried.

"Sir Andrew!"

The Squire was looking at me now in blank bewilderment.

"Sir Andrew, I wish Mr. Ferriday to remain while I make a statement of vital bearing on this matter of Miss Thrapp's whereabouts at the time of Henry Liscord's death. She will not speak for herself. But I can and will speak for her; and I wish to do so on oath."

I held the Bible up to his astonished gaze.

"I swear that what I am going to say is the truth: so help me, God."

I kissed the Book. I crossed to my dear wife standing there in a maze of silent wonder, her breath fluttering like a caged bird, the old crimson spots aflame now in her pale, hollow cheeks. I gave the Book into her shaking hands. "Keep it, and never part with it, whatever happens!" I hurriedly whispered to her. Then, in a silence that was death-like, I faced about to Sir Andrew again.

"Now listen all to me. Miss Thrapp has refused to say where she was, and what she was doing, at the time this murder is supposed to have occurred. But I know, and I am going to tell. It is impossible that she could have committed this crime, because she was

with me in Fairthorne church for the whole of the time unaccounted for. She reached the church at about a quarter before seven o'clock, no later; and she remained with me there continuously until the clock struck eight, when she left hurriedly and——"

"Stay, Benison! Not so fast."

In his utter astonishment at what I had said, Sir Andrew had been advancing towards me one slow step to almost every word. Now his eager face was close to mine. In the midst of his exceeding wonder, I saw a great relief and joy dawning in his eyes.

"Not so fast. This is of the utmost importance. Let me understand clearly before you go farther. We know she did not leave Stavisham until half-past six, and——"

"Sir Andrew, I know it would have been impossible for her to have reached Fairthorne by a quarter to seven if she had taken the footpath, which is much longer. But it is only four miles across the Down, as the crow flies. A good rider on a good horse could cover it in a quarter of an hour, and I can swear that when she reached the church she had every appearance of having ridden hard."

"Good!"

The word broke from him with a sort of sobbing satisfaction. He thought a moment deeply, keenly. He turned upon Valerie.

"Say whether this is true or not!" he demanded.

Watching her, I could not tell whether she had even heard the question, for she stood there like a woman turned into stone. But her answer came at last.

"It is true."

"Thank God!"

Sir Andrew flashed round at the lawyer who stood venomously glowering, first at Valerie, then at me, and

again at the girl. The hand clutched harder than ever at the papers.

"Ferriday! You have heard? What have I told you all along? An alibi can be proved. Your whole case comes to the ground, as I knew it would. And now I give you again the same choice I gave you an hour ago. Am I to be your friend or your enemy? Which is it to be?"

Never did hungry wolf look at lamb safe behind the bars of the fold as John Ferriday looked at Valerie then. Never did hatred gleam from mortal eyes as it did from the eyes of the baffled man into mine. If looks could kill, then had we both been stretched there and then dead at his feet. But though unsated lust of vengeance yet filled him body and soul, self-interest had even stronger sway over him. I saw him weaken—temporise with the evil spirit that he had harboured so long and so willingly. He threw up a deprecating, obsequious hand.

"Sir Andrew, I wish to be guided wholly by your judgment and direction," he said. "Of course it is plain that what has now been disclosed by Mr. Benison has thrown an entirely different light on——"

I heard no more. A sudden movement and piercing cry from Valerie, and behind me the reverberation of a heavy fall. I wheeled sharply round. Linda lay at full length upon the floor, her face deathly white, a thin red line of blood welling from one corner of her mouth.

What followed I can recall only in dim, broken sequence. A hubbub of low, horrified voices—Sir Andrew calling loudly at the door—Mrs. Odling, Willim, Valerie, dragging me roughly aside where I knelt caressing the still form, crying I know not what in my utter wretchedness of sorrow and self-condemnation.

The faded green fernery of the dining-room carpet surrounding the white upturned face faded away altogether. Now I looked down on the unconscious face enveloped by pillows scarce so white as itself. Vaguely I realised they had borne her up to her bedroom and laid her there. In the whispering quiet of the thronged room I heard a horse go galloping away outside. It seemed an age that I hovered about the bedside, helping to chafe the cold hands, drench with perfume the little kerchiefs that were being laid on the marble brow, dumbly filling the air of the darkened room with supplication that the last dread grief might be saved me.

The sound of wheels now, and plunging hoofs scattering the gravel of the carriage-way below, a quick heavy step upon the stair, a huge grey head, gold-spectacled, bending over me, firm hands taking me by the shoulders and impelling me towards the door.

There, shut out in the dark draughty passage, I remained for another age, it seemed, listening to the murmur of voices within the room; and there in some measure I regained mastery of myself and my scattered wits. When the doctor came out accompanied by Valerie, I could take his hand with no sign of my former pitiful assailment of incoherence. I uttered no word indeed. Valerie hurried away on some errand or other without a glance or word to me. Together the doctor and I passed silently down the stair and into the breakfast-room below.

Dr. Steele stood awhile warming his gloves at the fire.

"Of course you have been expecting this?" he said, at length, turning sharply round.

"Expecting it?" said I, aghast.

"Good heavens! Benison: what do you mean?

it possible you didn't know? But get command of yourself, man! Come to your senses, for heaven's sake!"

"I—I have sometimes thought——"

"And you never came to me?" It was said roughly, almost rudely. He seized his coat and flung himself into it, refusing my help with an angry wave of the hand. Then he looked at me, and seemed suddenly to relent.

"See here," he said, in a softened tone, "you have got to come down out of the clouds and realise facts—d'ye mind me? You had better know the worst at once. She is very seriously ill. It is hemorrhage due to long-standing consumption: brought on by shock and excitement. The hemorrhage has stopped now, and she is rallying. But she must be kept absolutely quiet for the next few days; then I shall know better what to say about her. But one thing you must promise me. Don't go near her yourself, Benison. Leave her entirely to this splendid old woman of yours."

"But surely I can——"

"No, you cannot." He seemed at a loss for a moment, regarding me curiously. "Unless you want to kill her, that is. She has said only one word—that you were to be kept from the room. I have promised her. I don't know what has happened, of course. I suppose there has been a quarrel or something. But you must keep away from that room absolutely until I say the word, or I will not answer for the consequences. Do you understand?"

Understand! I was at the window staring out sightlessly through the trellis of sun-gilded cedar-boughs, when his hand fell on my shoulder. I remember I started as though I had been asleep.

"And another thing, Benison. That big wench with the red cheeks and saucy look—she must not go

near your wife either, on any account. I have sent her to the right-about—*she* can understand plain talk at any rate. Now, will you give me your word that neither of you—— All right! That is well. I will be back as soon and often as I can."

How the day passed—how golden afternoon dragged on to ruddy evening, and this again to quiet starlit night, I could easily chronicle here, for I think I remember the agony of every second of every minute that journeyed by. Most of the time I spent waiting outside the impenetrably curtained door of Linda's room, or pacing the corridor beyond, so that whenever Mrs. Odling came out, I might be at hand for any news of how Linda fared. But it was hours, it seemed, before she made any appearance, and then she would have passed me by without word or look if I had not restrained her.

"How is she, Mrs. Odling?"

"How be she?" Mrs. Odling flung the words over her shoulder at me as she moved on. "Belike ye've killed her atween the pair o' ye—you and your Scarlet Woman!" Grumbling hotly to herself she made off and left me to my own weary beat to and fro.

I wandered at length up into my study, and looked forth awhile at the window. Valerie and Malcolm Garth passed slowly across the lawn together deep in anxious talk. Willim appeared once at the kitchen-garden gate, looked up at the house, shook his head, disappeared again. Another time Garth and Valerie drew into sight slowly measuring the sunny sward. His arm was about her then, but she was crying, I could plainly see, and indeed hear. Where was Cherry all this long time? I dimly thought.

Anon I found myself pacing up and down again outside the sick-room door. Mrs. Odling came out.

More to ease my strained mind with the sound of a human voice than from any hope of comfort from her, I spoke her name as she went by.

"Don't leave her longer than you can possibly help, Mrs. Odling."

It was about the most inept remark I could have hit upon. But instead of turning and rending me, as I immediately expected, she only paused, looking at me with almost kindness in her troubled eyes.

"She beant alone, Rector. The boy ha' been with her this hour foreby. She kep' all along asking for 'un, so I let 'un come in. And there he be setten houlding her hand and—— Listen! don't ye hear?"

I put my ear to the door. Cherry was singing, just above his breath—that was all: a sweet wild medley of notes, wavering and low, like summer wind in reeds heard afar. I could bear the sound only a moment. Mrs. Odling's hand fell on my shoulder, gently enough.

"There! doan't ye take on so, Rector. The good God is wi' us all, never fear. An' a good doctor-man. An' she do take her physic like an angel, she do, bless her! Like as not, she'll pull through now, and—— Hark! That dratted bell agen! 'Tis the side-door now."

She was hurrying off when I stopped her.

"I'll go, Mrs. Odling."

It was nearly dark by that time. But for the voice, I should not have known who it was at the door, waiting impatiently enough, for the bell had clanged out again peremptorily before I could get down the stair. But Steve Bunkle's burly tones were unmistakable. They pealed out before the door was half open.

"Tell the Rector—— Heough! 'tis the Rector's own self! Y'are wanted, Rector, over in Dingle Bottom.

'Tis ould Maast' Linchett. 'A be took worse, an' keeps all along callin' out for ye. Dying, 'a be, sure enough; and naun will content 'un but to have ye there, Rector. Can ye go right away—this very minute? Else belike ye'll be too late."

"Wait a moment, Steve."

I went back to Mrs. Odling, stumbling against her in the gloom where she had been listening half-way down the stair.

Hurriedly I gave her the gist of Steve's errand. She pondered over it a while.

"Ay! do ye go, Rector," she decided at last. "'Tis duty, and the pair o' us knows well enough what she would say about it. She'd say go, and go you must."

A few minutes later Steve and I were trudging off together in the darkness up the steep path that led to the Downs.

CHAPTER XXIII

—THE DAWN

THOUGH the night-air scarce stirred below in tree-cumbered Fairthorne, there was a pretty strong breeze blowing across the open Down.

As Steve Bunkle and I gained the crest of the long incline and set our faces eastward, the wind took us in the rear and urged us on, as though it knew the critical motive of our errand and wished to help us all it could.

He had been away rabbiting near Dingle Bottom this fortnight back, Steve told me, as he pounded along by my side, and he had seen a lot of the Linchetts. It being too far for him to get out and home from his work each day, he had been camping out at nights in one of the disused buildings attached to the lonely house, and of evenings he had formed the habit of smoking his pipe up in old Linchett's room, for mutual company's sake. No; he'd never seen the old man out of bed, he said, in answer to a question of mine; there he had lain helpless for three or four months back, he believed.

"And now," said Steve, "he'll never set foot to ground agen i' this world, by the looks o' him. Mortal bad, th'ould man be, to be sure an' all. But 'taint all along o' the dropsies. Summat on his mind—that's about the size on't, Reverend. And all the long lone

day he have been sorter light-headed like, believing hisself on horseback and driving—— Lor! Reverend, 'twur just as if 'a wur lashing and spurring on right into the jaws o'—the place as ye never mention. But in between whiles, when 'e come to hisself like, a' sits up in bed, and calls and calls for ye, Reverend. And then at last, Mis' Linchett, 'a says to me, 'Steve,' 'a says, 'do ye be a good kind sowl and get along for me down to the village and fetch t' Passon—I ha' no one to send but you,' says she. So off I goes, Reverend, and——"

Steve Bunkle arrested his flow of talk to peer anxiously into my face as well as he could under the star-light, as we strode along leaning back aslant on the unruly wind.

"Be ought amiss wi' ye, Reverend?" he queried. "Y'are so strange like. Belike we be going too fast for ye. Shall us slow up a bit whiles ye get your breath, sir? Y'are tired at the end o' the day, I doubt."

"Yes, I am tired, Steve," said I, withal essaying to mend my laggard pace, "but it is not wind and limb that are failing me. I am in terrible trouble, Steve. I have had a great shock to-day. But of course you could not have heard. My dear wife—she is lying very dangerously ill, Steve, and I am in horrible, horrible fear——"

At my words Steve Bunkle blew out a great gusty breath of astonishment and commiseration. He pulled up short. He got before me.

"Gorm! Ye don't say, sir! And I dragging ye away further and further all the time—th' good Lord forgive me! Do ye go back, Reverend, directly-minute! And I'll go on—I'll say as you couldn't——"

"No, I must go to him, Steve. I know she would

wish it, if—if she were fit to be told anything. She would never have let me stay back, Steve—you know what good women are."

"Ay, I knows!"

He said it with deep feeling. He tried no longer to persuade me, but took my arm and steered me into the easiest parts of the rough track, descending now, for we were nearing Dingle Bottom. It lay in a deep hollow between two enormous shoal-back hills. A single twinkling light came into view far below.

"'Tis his room, Reverend," said Steve, still keeping fast hold of my elbow and saving me more than once from a fall as we scrambled down the precipitous decline. "Anyways th'ould rapscullion will be main glad to see ye. And that will be comfort to tell on when ye gets back hoame-along. Mind that there mud-hole by the gate—terr'ble state the place be let down into, to be sure."

The sound of our footsteps and voices had gone on before us, for as we drew near the house we could see the dark figure of Mrs. Linchett at the open door. She seemed too scared for speech or any sort of greeting. Scarce waiting for us to enter, she led the way hurriedly up the stair within.

We found the old man sitting hunched up in bed, his chin upon his knees, the tassel of his red woollen night-cap swinging like a poppy in the wind as he rocked himself to and fro. At sight of me he shot out his two long, lean arms to their fullest reach.

"The good Lord be praised!" Over and over again the weakly-quavered words uprose in the dim room as he grasped each of my hands with all his little might. He was greatly changed since I had last visited him—shrunk to a mere shadow of human form But his eyes had gained an uncanny brightness. As

he fastened them on me, they glowed like live coals. I could see at once that the old man was nearing his end, and nearing it in desperate fear of something. He began to pour out words, incoherent, forced through dry lips in a hoarse fierce whisper at first, but gradually gaining strength and intelligibility as he struggled to unburden himself of the thing that was evidently weighing him down.

"Reverend!" He looked round sharply, suspiciously, at Steve and Mrs. Linchett standing at the other side of the bed, as though he wished them gone, but seemed to change his mind. "No, let 'em bide—let 'em hear. Afore long, I'll be somewheres as will be too fur off for anyone to harm me. Reverend!"

"Yes, Linchett."

"Ye mind all about—that there furriner—as were found dead on the hill the day arter—arter laast Stavisham Horse Fair?"

"Yes, yes! I remember all about it. Go on!"

"Reverend, it—it wur me as—as killed Henry Liscord!"

"You, Linchett!"

In utter bewilderment at the old man's words, my very hair seemed to be tugging at its roots. I looked round quickly at the other two. Obviously they had heard as clearly as I, and were almost equally astounded. A great joy began to stir within me. They were both good witnesses—the woman sober, as I realised now with infinite satisfaction: Steve and I would both be able to swear to that, if ever the need arose. I turned again to the dying man, a berserk hunger for more of his story now upon me.

"You killed him, Linchett! What do you mean? How did you kill him?"

He sank slowly back upon the pillow. For a moment

I thought nevermore would he speak in this world. But he rallied marvellously. Both hands clutching feverishly at my arm as he lay, he began to pour out his tale in little breathless spurts, with laboured pauses in between.

"We was all in—in the tap-room at—the Barley Mow in Stavisham—drinking and playing cards, Reverend. And—and in he comes, this—this here Henry Liscord—a real gent—we—we knowed un to be, for all his—his starved look and ragged clothes. And he made hisself so friendly like—and by and by he—he took a hand wi' us, and—and afore the afternoon was out . . ."

The old voice quavered down into silence. But as a dying fire will break up into flame again, so the voice flickered up once more into the quiet of the room.

"Afore long—Reverend—he'd won a—a powerful sight o' money. And I—I'd lost near upon th' laast penny I'd made that day."

"'Tis true!" whispered Mrs. Linchett in my ear. "'A come hoame wi' scarce a groat in's pockets, as I minds well."

I pushed her aside impatiently—rudely, I am afraid. I bent to the dying man again. "Yes, yes! Tell me what happened then!"

"Then 'a went off—the way we'd tould him—and I—I waited a bit afore I saddles my horse and rides arter him, meaning to get my money back—fair means or foul. I come upon him, Reverend, sudden-like—just where the path bends—in the Long Furze—that was where they—they found un dead next morning. I—I didn't see un, till I wur right on him—Reverend. More'n half drunk I wur, and ridin' hard. And—and there he was, lying asleep acrost the path. I reins in all I knows—but 'twur too late. Th' mare trod

right—right on his head, Reverend—I heard the crunch. Then she—she stumbles and—and over we goes, the pair on us. And when I—when I picked myself—out o' the furze, there a' wur dead; ay! dead as—as——"

A roar from Steve Bunkle stopped him there.

"Cheer up, gaffer! Ye never killed un. 'A wur dead a'ready!"

The old man directed a long blinking startled stare at Steve. He turned to me.

"What's he mean, Reverend?"

"Mean, Linchett? Why, didn't you read it in the paper—you who cut everything out so carefully? How the doctor said at the inquest that he must have died of heart-disease before the wound was inflicted? And how he——"

"Never—never a word—s'help me! I caan't read, as missus knows. Glory—glory be to God!"

And that was the end of him on this earth. He fell back upon his pillows, and there we stood watching as the rigidity and grisly hue of death gradually overspread his face. But, after all, it was not terror but joy and relief that killed him. And the man, even the worst, who dies with the name of God upon his lips must still have a chance—who dare deny?

When it was certain he had gone, I drew them down on their knees for a moment to commend him to the Eternal Mercy. And then I led them from the room.

"Steve," said I, as we passed down the stair, "do you stop here with Mrs. Linchett until I can get back to the village and send her the help she needs. I must hurry off now, and you know why."

. . .

Of that long weary struggle back over hill and dale through the whistling darkness, I remember little. But

I reached home at last. And as my key was fumbling in the lock, the door silently opened to me. Valerie Thrapp stood there alone, holding a candle over her head. I looked at her wonder-struck. Her face was radiant: her eyes like stars in the east for joy. Before I had set foot over the threshold, she began to speak, her words tripping one another up in her haste to tell me what was in her mind.

"Frank, I have seen her and spoken to her—my darling Linda! I had to: I could not bear it any longer. I watched till Mrs. Odling had left the room, then crept in. Do not be alarmed—all is well. But listen to me. I have told her all my wretched story—every word I said to you in the church that night, and every word you said to me. She knows now that it was all on my side, and that you never had any feeling for me, nor ever in your life gave me one word or look. She is wholly satisfied, and very happy. I am here to meet you and tell you this by her will and wish. She is waiting now for you to go to her. I had to leave her door open so that she could hear your first step. Go up quietly, but the sooner the better. Oh, never mind me! After so much wrong, cannot I do one miserable little scrap of right without—without——"

I was up half-a-dozen steps now, but stopped and stretched a hand back to her.

"Valerie! God bless you for this thing! Now I have something to tell you—and you, Garth"—for Malcolm Garth had silently emerged from the adjoining room, and now stood by her side. "Valerie—Malcolm! Listen to this. I have learned to-night how Henry Liscord came by his injury. The blow that fell on him was not dealt by any weapon wielded by human hand, but by a horse's shoe. Someone

rode over him accidentally as he lay in the path, already dead no doubt. That one is now dead himself. But before he died he related it all to me in the presence of two witnesses. So there is an end to the mystery, and an end to Ferriday's power for harm."

I left them amazedly, delightedly scanning each other's faces, and finished the flight of stairs at a bound.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE HAPPY ENDING

" How long have I been lying here, Frank ? "

I turned at the sound of the voice, low and yet so clear. I had been reading to Linda, sitting in the window in the declining evening light ; but I had closed the book some while before, thinking that she slept. My eyes were dazzled by the descending glory without. It was a moment or two before I could see her, lying there behind in the dimness of the room.

" How long, dear ? " No need for the considering pause—I had counted almost every minute that had since dragged by, day and night. " It is exactly a month and a day."

I rose to straighten her pillows, moving her a little for her better comfort. A hot lump came to my throat as I realised how easy lifting her had become. She said no more for the moment, but lay looking straight before her at the deepening sky, her hand in mine.

" Such wonderful letters, Frank ! " she said at last. " There are two people at least in the world supremely happy. Every time Valerie writes, you can read that between the lines and more. And Cherry too ! It was a great idea, wasn't it ?—making them take him with them. Oh ! I am so glad I did not let them put the wedding off. But how can she find time to write

so often?—rushing about as they do from place to place."

I glanced at the little table by the bedside. It was littered over with Valerie's letters, the early ones with French and Italian stamps on them, and ever-changing postmarks, and now the last one that had arrived this morning dated from some old town in Spain. Linda went back awhile to her old pondering look out of the window. Presently she turned her great eyes full on mine.

"A month and a day! That much more of happy life together has been given to us as well, Frank, when I never thought—— Oh, God is good!"

"Good?"

In uncontrollable bitterness the questioning word escaped me. I took her in my arms and held her fast as though by that means I hoped to shield her from the dark thing I had seen approaching every moment of that dread month and day.

"Then at last you are convinced, dear?"

The words struck like a knife straight into my heart. For the first time in my life I broke down there and then into resistless weeping—blinding, angry, rebellious tears that I neither would nor could keep back.

"It is all so cruel!—so utterly, brutally needless and unreasoning. God is good, you say! Where is His goodness to us? All our lives long we have been held apart; and now, when at last we have come together in happy love, the cup is to be dashed from our lips, as though we were children ignorantly drinking poison. What have we done to be treated so? Which of us has sinned? I know I have always tried to serve God faithfully—always tried, even though I know I have failed a thousand times. And you! Why, your life has been one long sweet, pure sacrifice

of self from beginning to end! God himself could not find a fault in you. Yet we have not borne enough, it seems. He wants from us ever more suffering, more loneliness. Our hearts are to be torn asunder again almost in the moment of their joining. Ah! if He would only take us together! That would be mercy! That would be goodness! But, no. It is human grief, human suffering, this good God of yours seems to need and feed upon, relentlessly, for ever and ever. Well, the power is His, and He must use it if He will. But at least there is left to men one thing He cannot take from them—the right to die. The day you are taken from me——"

But at that the white thin hand had risen, and gently, caressingly, silenced all this wicked balderdash upon my lips. The hand drew away. In its place, her own lips came to rest light and fragrant as a flower.

"Frank!"

She turned her head aside a moment, the while her breath fluttered within her like a bird caught in a gin. The storm of her ailment passed. The great grey-blue eyes turned again to mine, and seemed to look deep into the puny weak tortured thing I called my soul.

"Frank, I have loved to hear you say this because now at last I know what sort of love it is you bear me. Nothing but real love could have made you speak so—you, of all men! And because of love, you will be forgiven. But you are seeing it all wrong—all, all! Even now you have not won any true vision. And that is why we are to be parted again so soon. We have got to learn, dear; and I know now there is no other way. We have got to be taught how to endure together happiness that is to last for ever. God has shown us, just in these few months of our married life, what this happiness can be. But out of His very love

for us, He dare not leave us to it any longer. He knows it is all beyond our little strength—all too hard a test; and a test that breaks, only destroys a thing instead of leaving it the fitter for service. Do not you see?"

For the moment I could not answer.

"Do you mean, then," said I, at last, "that the same Power which first parted us, and has kept us apart all our lives, is now parting us again? Then it is a power of evil, not of good."

"Not of evil, Frank, but the same good Power—because the same love is clear through it all. Dear! you *must* see now why it was we were parted all those long years ago."

"Yes, I see well enough. It was because of my own blind, outrageous folly. And for that folly I am to be punished, it seems, as though it were the foulest crime man could commit on earth."

She caught at my words, her eyes dancing—the old crimson spots, tinier than ever now, sharply centring the wan lilies of her cheeks. It was the very face of joy she lifted to mine.

"Yes, and do not you see that the fact of your losing me now being so great a punishment to you, is really the greatest blessing and reward for myself I can think of or desire? It brings me grief, but it brings me rejoicing as well. Oh, Frank, there is so much in my heart I want to tell you, and I know I have so little time! We were parted, dear, first because God had put human love in my own heart; and He knew—I myself know now—that the only safe earthly keeping-place for such love is a heart of sorrow. You see the truth of that all the world over. And then we were parted because—Oh, you must know it well enough!—because there was no love then in your heart for me. Your after-life proved that. Look back over those

comfortable busy years, and own to yourself how little you ever regretted what you now call your blind, outrageous folly. Did you give me a single thought at any time? You know that I was soon no more to you than as if I had never been. And I?—well, I had God's eternal treasure, and kept it safe; kept it as pure and strong as I could, so that if ever it pleased Him to send you for it, it would be ready and bright as the day it was given. And you did come back for it, Frank, in the end. You have it now. You will have it for ever and ever by your own changeless will and wish. Then what are you grieving about? Why not rejoice with me? What is a few years' parting when we know we have all of eternity to spend together, sure of ourselves as we are sure of each other, and sure that it is a God of Love who holds our little lives in the hollow of His hand?"

"I am grieving," I cried, holding her more and more passionately, despairfully to me, "because, though I own the wisdom of the past, I cannot see any goodness or even wisdom in what . . . what seems to be darkening over us now. Granted I deserved all I got, do I deserve what is now to fall on me? There is our beautiful wedded life together going out like a spent fire when it has only just been kindled. Why could it not be let to shine a little longer? Why should happiness be so brief in the world, and sorrow so long? I know the fire was lighted for us in your youth and mine, and I just trod it out ruthlessly in the dust. But now it has burnt up again so brightly, why—why . . ."

She was still looking up into my face with the old serene joyous look, not a shadow from my own black mood of mordant bitterness dimming its pure lustre. But there was a quaver in her voice as she answered me.

"Frank, that old first parting was for us both. We both needed it—that much I am sure of now: yet oh, how I resented it and rebelled against it at the time! But this second parting that is coming, is not for me—it is for your sake alone."

"For my sake! Oh, Linda, what dreadful thought is this! For my sake?—*mine*! Why, it is going to crush me! I shall be battered down by sorrow into a wretched death myself—drowned in grief, with no more chance than a moth caught at sea in a storm!"

"No! You will not. I know you. And it is because I know you that I can face what is now coming to us with such trust and joy. For I know it is the one trial that can purge out the—the weakness, Frank, the old shortcoming in your nature: the thing that has always just stopped you on the brink of greatness and left you what you are. Dear, dear Frank! I, who loved you more than life itself, was forced long ago to that belief. And I see it clearer than ever now. The truth is you have not suffered enough in the world to be really great—really fit to do the work you were made for. Whether it is right or wrong to try and save other people from suffering in their earthly lives, I am not sure. But I am sure it is wrong, and against the loving wisdom of God, if we try to save ourselves That has been your fault, dear. You have always chosen the sunny side of the road. You have loved too much all that made for easy-going, tranquil times. You have sought out the smooth, pleasant ways, and shunned the stony tracks. And now I see that you have to make up for the past, doing it by your own will and striving, with no help from any other. Oh, do not you now see why I am to be taken? It is just so that cleansing, strengthening sorrow may come upon you, as it can come in no other way."

The light in the evening sky had deepened to a rich rose-red. Not a trace of cloud as yet vexed its formless, glowing serenity. Not a breath of air moved outside. Somewhere down in the garden, one solitary bird still sang quietly on, though all the rest had fallen mute. Linda stirred in my arms.

"Raise me up a little, dear, on the pillows, so that I can see all you see. Oh, what a glorious sunset! Just light, and no more! But such light! The crimson merging into gold beyond, and the gold to green, and the green melting above into the true blue of the sky. But all pure light, like God's love made visible, Just a little higher, dear—I do so want to see it all. Ah, how beautiful, and hopeful, and happy it looks! Frank, do you know how I should like to go? I should like that pure light as of liquid amber to be a radiant sea, and the far green above a distant shore. And the one star shining upon it a haven-light lit for me. And I should like a boat to be coming for me now, to carry me over. We would make such a happy parting of it, dearie—you knowing why I went, and I knowing why you had to stay, but only for a little longer. And think how we would spend the days of separation, each constantly sending to the other happy love-thoughts to and fro across the sea! Nothing sad or sorrowful in our separated loves—only just glad patient waiting and—and remembrance. . . ."

A while she lay silent in my arms. And then once more her cough shook her mercilessly. When she spoke again, it was but on the lightest breath, and uncertainly.

"Frank . . . is it not nearly time . . . to say, 'Our Father'? You begin . . . as you . . . always do."

We had said the prayer together every night since the commencement of our married life. I did as she bade

me. Never before had the grand old words seemed so full of comfort and heart-uniting truth: never before had they been so hard to say. But clause by clause she repeated them with me until we came to 'For ever and ever.' I said it alone. I waited, bending my ear down. No—she had not said it. Sharply I looked round upon her. The white hand had lifted. Upon her face there framed itself just a shadow of the old merry laugh. The lips moved. The hand pointed, eagerly, meaningly. Following its direction, I saw a little dark blot of cloud—just one speck of shadow and no more—had risen, and was now drifting across the resplendent sky. Our eyes met—hers still bravely laughing eyes, faith and love brimming in them.

"Oh, what a wonder, Frank! Just as if it were . . the little boat . . . come for . . ."

It had come indeed. And so passed my Sunset Bride, and so began for us both the life of happy, patient waiting for the great sunrise which is to begin for all the promised Eternal Day.

THE END

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